



ACADEMIES

and the future of state education

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with a foreword by
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Foreword

Andrew Adonis

Whenever I am faced by MPs or councillors suspicious of academies, I simply suggest that they go and visit one. They almost always come back enthusiastic and say they want one. “I have seen the future of secondary education and it works,” as one parliamentary colleague said on returning from the outstanding Mossbourne Academy in Hackney.

In future I will also suggest that sceptics read this book, not for my remarks but for what the principals of academies have to say. All of them are writing from considerable experience of school leadership, and all of them are convinced that these new independent state schools represent a decisive break with past failure and a chance to shape a fundamentally better educational future for our country.

There are now 83 academies. A further 230 will open by 2010 as we accelerate the programme. Academy GCSE results are rising at more than twice the national average, including in English and maths. They are on average three times oversubscribed, in stark contrast to the failing or weak schools which they mostly replaced. As Conor Ryan details in his introduction, Ofsted is favourably impressed, giving consistently high ratings for their leadership and management, which is what matters most to the creation of a successful school. The annual PricewaterhouseCoopers surveys of those who attend, or work in, academies tell an

equally positive tale, with overwhelmingly strong support for their ethos, leadership and standards.

The benefits of independence

Academy principals explain why this is the case in the following chapters. They explain the benefits of academy independence, including strong leadership and ethos, less red tape and more freedom to innovate and raise standards. They praise the positive contribution of sponsors to governance, community engagement and to setting ambitious goals. They highlight the relentless focus of academies on the quality of teaching and learning, and the development of a wider curriculum including sport and the arts – seeking to nurture the full range of talents of each individual pupil to the full, just as private schools do.

In describing their work and mission in all these areas, they demonstrate conclusively why the state should be investing in academies where capital funding goes to support transformation projects with strong independent leadership and governance capable of bringing about sustainable change, rather than simply putting the same money into new school buildings without the other crucial elements essential to the creation of a first class school. In academies, investment and reform go hand-in-hand, the one reinforcing the other.

The sponsor is central to the success of each academy. Sponsors do not just confer benign assistance and additional resources. They are the lynchpin of the governance of each academy, in place of the local authority and its nominated (often political) governors in a conventional state school. Sponsors and their nominated governors are responsible for the appointment (and if necessary removal) of the principal, and for setting the expectations and ethos within

which the entire academy community works. The excellent academy principals writing in this book would not be there if they had not been appointed – and in some cases actively head-hunted – by their sponsors.

The emergence of academy chains

Another crucial role of sponsors lies in the development of academy ‘chains’. There are now more than 40 multi-academy sponsors, including the Harris Federation, ARK, the United Learning Trust, the Haberdashers’ Livery Company, Thomas Telford with the Mercers Livery Company, and the Emmanuel Schools Foundation.

Some multi-sponsors are developing more than ten academies and their chains now account for more than half of all open academies. Academy chains mostly have chief executives selected by the sponsors from their most successful existing school principals (such as Dan Moynihan who writes later), who seek to replicate their successful template across each new academy joining the chain. They often appoint principals to their new academies from within their existing ‘family’ of schools, identifying the most promising leaders who are specially trained to take up headships elsewhere within their ‘groups’.

Academy chains – able to leverage excellent leadership, ethos, branding and curriculum across more than one academy and to do so rapidly – are guarantors of quality, accelerating the expansion of academies, because of the ease and reliability with which the chains are able to take on new projects. Local authorities now often seek to commission a particular academy chain to sponsor one of their academies, from their experience or knowledge of what that chain has to offer.

Before academies there were no school ‘chains’ within

the English state school sector. This is one respect in which academies are at the cutting edge of educational innovation. There are many more. Academy sponsors and principals are determined to do whatever it takes to succeed in many of the toughest communities in the country. They have a clarity of vision and purpose to focus on what is likely to make a difference; their credibility in arguing for change is generally unimpeachable; and they do not readily take 'no' for an answer.

The following chapters highlight particularly worthwhile innovations. Martyn Coles notes that academies have much smaller and more expert governing bodies than most state schools. His academy in Southwark, sponsored by the City of London, has just 15 governors, which is a larger number than for most academies but smaller than virtually any state secondary school. From his previous experience of state schools, he regards the change as wholly positive. We in government are now reflecting on whether we should be seeking to reduce the size of state school governing bodies and make other changes to improve their effectiveness, as in academies.

Curriculum innovation has been equally positive. Academies are not required to follow the national curriculum, beyond the core subjects of English, maths, science and ICT. Michael Wilshaw at Mossbourne describes how he has pioneered intensive literacy and numeracy programmes for 11-year-olds who arrive at the academy below standard. This is assisted by a separate Year 7 building, one of six small school learning areas within the academy, which also enables children to make the transition from primary to secondary school more effectively. Curriculum differentiation for pupils seriously behind their peers at the start of secondary school is one of

the most important issues in secondary education, and the Mossbourne practice – which yields spectacular results in terms of achievement by pupils of all backgrounds – is ripe for emulation.

Some sponsors and principals are going further and eliminating the primary/secondary divide entirely by developing all-through academies from the age of three or five to 18. Richard Gilliland, whose Priory LSST trust in Lincoln is pioneering an all-through academy in an area of very low educational attainment, believes this could be a “win, win situation for everyone”. He argues it will enable primary school children “to have the benefit of secondary school expertise in specialist subjects such as technology, science and sport” while the primary element brings to the secondary level “an environment which makes young people feel more comfortable”. As he notes, there is (surprisingly) little evidence for or against all-through schools in English state education, although they are popular in the private sector. However, “acts of faith do not need to be blind; they can be based on common sense”. I will be studying this particular act of faith carefully for its possible wider application.

Philip O’Hear is equally compelling about the success of Capital City Academy’s development of sporting excellence at the highest level; and Mark Grundy of Shireland Academy is a pioneer, alongside the Thomas Telford School, of excellence in online learning. These are two other areas of academy experience important to national education policy.

Breaking an historic divide

Academies are also bridging the damaging historic divide between state and private schools in radical ways. The very

existence of academies, as independent state schools which sit self-confidently between the existing state and private sectors, does this to a considerable extent. As I pointed out last year to the Headmasters and Headmistresses Conference (HMC), which represents leading independent schools, academies will soon be educating as many pupils as the entire HMC, all of them in independent schools not charging fees. Beyond this, more than 20 private schools are now either sponsoring or partnering academies, and four high performing private day schools – in Liverpool, Manchester and Bristol – are themselves becoming academies, making their excellent education available on an all-ability basis without fees, in areas that badly need more good schools and beacons of excellence.

Academies are injecting the best of the DNA of private schools into the state funded sector, and the engagement of private schools is a key objective of the programme. Anthony Seldon, Master of Wellington College, describes how the Wellington Academy on Salisbury Plain will replicate the best of Wellington College, without the fees barrier. In particular, the academy will develop a centre of excellence in the education of children from military families, a mission which Wellington Academy has in common with Wellington College. As part of this, the academy will have two boarding houses, developed by boarding staff at the College. As a beneficiary myself of an assisted boarding education, I am keen to see if boarding education could play a larger role in academies, to benefit vulnerable children and those from highly mobile families.

Each new wave of academies brings a richer tapestry of sponsors. One critical new source of sponsors is universities, pioneering intensive engagement between

higher education and secondary schools. This is another academy innovation for wider application. More than 30 universities are now engaged in academies; many more are in the offing. I would welcome engagement by every university in an academy project. There is no better way for universities, which are normally the strongest educational institutions in their own area, to widen participation and assist in the educational regeneration of their local communities.

So I agree: academies are the future of secondary education, and it works. But it works only if academies continue to be independent state schools with high quality, committed sponsors and principals who have the full measure of control and responsibility necessary to run a successful school. With the cornerstone of independence secure, any number of academies could be established, transforming education nationwide.

Lord Adonis is Minister for Schools. He was Tony Blair's education adviser, and later Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit, from 1998 to 2005. A former Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford, and journalist on the Financial Times and Observer, his books include 'A class act: the myth of Britain's classless society' (1997).

The history of academies

Conor Ryan

The convocation hall of Church House, Westminster played host to a remarkable reception in November 2007. Present were the former Conservative prime minister, Margaret Thatcher and her late-eighties education secretary, Kenneth (now Lord) Baker. To represent the Labour government was the junior schools minister Andrew Adonis. The reason for this bipartisan gathering was to mark twenty years of City Technology Colleges (CTCs), independent non-fee paying schools that Tony Blair's Labour government further developed into city academies, with Adonis as their tenacious midwife.

A remarkable transformation in education has taken place over the last two decades. A system dominated by local education authorities has become one where head teachers enjoy far greater financial flexibility through local management of schools. At the same time, a national curriculum has been introduced, along with national testing, performance tables, targets and regular inspection. These changes were embraced by Labour under Tony Blair. More importantly, after the government made extra resources available from 1999, these reforms were matched by a level of investment unseen since the post-war reconstruction.

Sir Cyril Taylor, who chaired the CTC Trust¹ from 1987-2007, recalls that Thatcher first mooted CTCs with

business people in 1986 when “it was agreed that we needed a new type of secondary school, independent of local authority control, but comprehensive and serving the needs of the inner city.”² The new schools would have a strong technology bias and would be sponsored by business. They would have a longer school day and, despite their innovative feel, a more traditionalist ethos. Baker said they would be “unashamedly different”.³

From confrontation to consensus

The CTCs’ combination of business sponsorship and independence from local education authorities caused controversy in the education world. And their introduction coincided with the development of grant-maintained schools, a policy that initially had far greater impact.⁴ But it was the demand that their construction would be entirely funded by business sponsors that was to be their Achilles heel. By 1994, just fifteen CTCs had been established, half the thirty originally anticipated, and the policy was effectively abandoned in favour of the less costly technology colleges or specialist schools. Instead of having to find in excess of £10 million sponsorship, the technology colleges had to find just £100,000, which would be matched by government.⁵ They would then receive additional revenue to pay for extra specialist teaching.

In 1995, David Blunkett signalled the Labour party’s support for specialist schools.⁶ In government, the number of specialist schools expanded from 181 in 1997 to 685 by 2001.⁷ Today, around 90 per cent of England’s 3,200 secondary schools have at least one of twelve specialisms.

Before the 1997 election, there was a belief that the Labour party should focus on ‘standards not structures’, with Blunkett focusing in particular on the teaching of the

‘3Rs’ in primary schools. But as he and Blair sought urban education reform, they revisited the idea of independent non-fee paying schools. As Blair’s education adviser, Adonis visited many CTCs and was impressed by their results. One CTC – Thomas Telford in Shropshire – had acquired the reputation as the best comprehensive in the country.⁸ What Adonis also discovered was an energy and dynamism which was too often absent in other local schools, particularly in deprived areas. It is worth recalling that, by 1997, barely half of all state secondary schools had more than 30 per cent of their pupils achieving five good GCSEs including English and maths. Adonis has recently described the origins of academies and the rationale behind the new programme:

“Academies flowed partly from a frank assessment of the number of inadequate secondary schools being run on traditional lines, particularly in London and our other cities; partly from an analysis of the unambiguous success of the 15 City Technology Colleges run on independent lines with business and voluntary sector sponsors; partly from conversations with these sponsors and other excellent potential school promoters keen to be given the opportunity to make a difference; and partly from international evidence – not least from Sweden with its progressive society and political culture – that an independent state school model could harness new levels of parental engagement and support, and new energy and dynamism in the leadership and management of schools.”⁹

So, academies were not simply CTCs Mark 2. Indeed, Blunkett was keen to root the programme in an approach to diversity that he had been developing since 1995.¹⁰

The city academies were to be part of a wider programme to extend diversity within the state sector and raise standards where existing provision is inadequate. They were to offer a real change and improvement in pupil performance, for example by innovative approaches to management, governance, teaching and learning from other local schools, including a specialist focus in at least one curriculum area. Academies would replace schools which were either in special measures or underachieving. And they would have the freedom to vary the school day or year if they wished and to design new approaches to staffing.

Blunkett made his announcement in a Social Market Foundation lecture in which he also proposed new Foundation and Voluntary-Aided Schools, some sponsored by the Church of England; more existing private schools joining the state sector; and alternative providers from the voluntary, religious or business sectors taking over weak schools or replacing them with city academies. All of these objectives would be delivered over the next eight years.

Private schools like Belvedere in Liverpool and Bristol Cathedral School abandoned selection and fees to become academies. Significant private school sponsors supported academies too, with leading figures like Anthony Seldon, Master of Wellington College, arguing that such sponsorship was an important part of the mission of private schools. The Church of England also became a strong supporter, with some academies enjoying joint Anglican and Catholic sponsorship.¹¹ But while the academies had their origins in CTCs, they would differ in crucial respects. For a start, the sponsors would pay only £2 million or 10 per cent of the capital costs, whichever was smaller. The government could contribute the rest from its huge school

capital expenditure programme which supported the building of 1,100 new schools between 1997 and 2007.¹² This investment was crucial in overcoming local authority resistance: ministers could expect new academies as part of an investment and reform package. Equally important were the funding agreements with the education department, which provided guarantees on contentious issues like admissions policies, while keeping local authorities out of their day-to-day management.

Tackling the teething problems

Having secured the necessary legislation in the 2000 Learning and Skills Act, Blunkett announced that the first academies would be in Brent, Lambeth and Liverpool. But it was not all plain sailing: teaching unions were hostile, with John Dunford, leader of the Secondary Heads Association, calling them “cuckoos in the nest” that might damage other local schools through greater competition.¹³ The National Union of Teachers allied itself with the Socialist Workers Party in the Anti-Academies Alliance to oppose local academy proposals, sometimes going to court to try and halt the opening of the new schools. A vocal minority of Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs criticised the greater freedoms on admissions and exclusions policies.

In fact, academies tend to have a more comprehensive intake than other schools, but because they are full rather than under subscribed, the proportion of lower income children can be smaller than in their predecessor schools as they attract a wider social mix. Academies have twice the national average proportion of children in receipt of free school meals. They do have the same right as specialist schools to reserve a tenth of their places for pupils with an aptitude in their specialism. Some academies that inherited

a disruptive cohort of pupils used initial exclusions to set a standard for future behaviour. But this tended to be a temporary expedient rather than a feature of their approach. PricewaterhouseCoopers, in their 2007 report on academies noted that: “Compared to the national average and other schools in similar circumstances, academies have significantly higher proportions of pupils who are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM); have English as an Additional Language (EAL); and have Special Educational Needs (SEN).”¹⁴

Moreover, an allegedly creationist curriculum at one academy drew secular ire, although the school taught the national curriculum in science. There were claims of unfair funding. In fact, academies are funded in revenue terms on the same basis as comparable maintained schools. But the capital costs of some of the early academies – located as they were on expensive inner city land often with a big clean-up job required before building could begin – were higher than the norm, occasionally topping £30 million. Some of the extra cost reflected imaginative designs by leading architects, or the lack of economies of scale as each academy had its own construction programme. These costs have been reduced as the programme is now managed on the same basis as other secondary school construction.

While such criticism was to be expected, the early academies were not without their own teething problems: one of the first, Unity City Academy in Middlesbrough, was placed in special measures by Ofsted. Its performance has since improved.¹⁵ As the academies were often replacing some of the most challenging schools in the country, and taking their pupils with them, their results inevitably took time to improve, which left some initially towards the bottom of the school league tables.

But academies were given the chance to prove themselves, not least because of their cost and their political importance. The 2005 Labour manifesto promised that 200 academies would be “open or in the pipeline” by 2010. Blair secured agreement from Gordon Brown before he stepped down in 2007 that at least 400 would open through the school capital programme. Indeed, despite initial scepticism, a visit to Mossbourne Academy in Hackney shortly before Brown became prime minister helped persuade him that academies should play a central part in his education policies. Far from the failing school shunned by local parents a decade before, Mossbourne had become an ‘outstanding school’ six times over subscribed. Indeed, across Hackney, the council and its arms-length Learning Trust is now replacing most of the borough’s secondary schools with academies. By 2007, authorities like Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield were putting academies at the heart of their educational plans.

Cross-party support

Academies enjoy growing opposition support. Given their similarities with CTCs, it is hardly surprising that the Conservatives put academies at the heart of their schools’ policy, and regularly quote their achievements to justify their own policies. Their schools policy envisages ‘new academies’ which would continue to be the subject of funding agreements with the Secretary of State, but without any constraints on the curriculum. But shadow education secretary Michael Gove is also keen to highlight their freedom from local authorities:

“Talking to the head teachers who have presided over such dramatic improvements and such superb results in these schools....one thing

resonates as they explain their success. They were able to transform their schools because they were liberated from the bureaucracy.”¹⁶

Similarly, Nick Clegg, as leader of the Liberal Democrats, has been more open to an academy model of education, although he calls them ‘Free Schools’ after the Swedish model. He has said:

“There is nothing wrong at all with allowing schools the freedom to innovate. Nothing wrong with bringing committed people and organisations into our education system. And nothing wrong with allowing schools to exist outside direct daily local government management – as long as they are under local government oversight.”¹⁷

Clearly there is a difference in emphasis between the parties. Labour has sought to mainstream academies, engaging rather than confronting local authorities as the programme expanded. The Conservatives, having abandoned a commitment to new grammar schools, are anxious to talk up differences with Labour and be seen to confront local authorities. The Liberal Democrats have still to reconcile their new leader’s approach with the traditional hostility of their activists and councillors.

However, it is notable that Liberal Democrat controlled Richmond Council decided in March 2008 to replace three of its schools with a new academy managed by Kunskapsskolan, a leading Swedish school provider. Moreover, none of the parties envisages academy providers making a profit from the running of schools, although new government plans for disruptive pupils may involve units run by for-profit providers.¹⁸ Meanwhile the Conservatives have trumpeted their enthusiasm for involving private providers who put any profits back into the school.¹⁹

Success breeds success – and support

Academies are now part of the educational landscape. There are 83 open today, with 50 opening in September 2008, 80 in 2009 and 100 in 2010.²⁰ Organisations like the United Learning Trust, Absolute Return for Kids (ARK) and the Harris Trust are creating chains of academies.

More importantly, academies are making a big difference. Across the 36 academies that recorded GCSE results in both 2006 and 2007 (20 excluding CTC conversions), the proportion of pupils gaining five good GCSEs improved by an average of 6.1 percentage points, or 3.6 percentage points when English and maths results are included. The national increases for maintained schools were 1.9 and 1.4 percentage points respectively. Moreover, the percentage of pupils achieving five good GCSEs in the 36 academies has almost doubled since 2001.²¹ And if, as usually happens, results at Key Stage 3 (age 14), which show a 22 percentage point improvement in English between 2001 and 2007, feed through into results two years later, improvements in GCSE English and maths are likely to be even stronger in future.²²

Parents, too, see academies as a good thing, with three applications for every academy place, and some London academies considerably more oversubscribed.²³ And independent reports paint an increasingly positive picture. The chief inspector has noted that: “Inspections of academies are beginning to confirm a rising trend in effectiveness; there are examples of strong and effective leadership having a positive, and sometimes transformational, impact on pupils’ progress and achievement, often from a low base.”²⁴ The National Audit Office found that: “Most academies have made good progress in improving GCSE

results, and the programme is on track to deliver good value for money.”²⁵ And PricewaterhouseCoopers has confirmed that: “Progress in terms of pupil achievement has generally exceeded corresponding improvements at a national level and amongst other similar schools”. It attributes this success to a combination of independence, strong leadership, sponsor engagement, specialism and improving behaviour.²⁶ Of course, there are still issues in some academies. In particular, GCSE results, while improving, still lag behind the national average. But the evidence is that academies are on an upward trend.

The programme has also changed. Ed Balls, as Brown’s schools secretary, has required academies to follow the national curriculum in core subjects. Local authorities are consulted more to help momentum by reducing opposition; in some cases, they are co-sponsors, though without the powers they would have over maintained schools. Both these changes have been portrayed as a weakening of the programme, but it has also arguably allowed it to acquire a faster pace.

There have also been funding changes. Since procurement became part of the government’s Building Schools for the Future programme, new sponsors have been asked for an endowment rather than a capital contribution. No financial contribution is now required from universities, further education colleges or high achieving schools acting as sponsors. Although Balls was criticised by the opposition for these moves – some of which predated him – they have not greatly reduced academy independence. More significantly for the future of the programme, Brown made clear that the programme would be accelerated and has a key role in the ‘National Challenge’ to improve 638 low-attaining secondary schools. By 2010, at least one in ten

secondary schools will be an academy, and the programme will continue no matter who is in power. While some opposition continues, the force of academy opponents is diminished by political and physical reality.

Why academies make a difference

Given that academies are here to stay, we should understand how and why they make a difference. Despite the changes and the controversy, their success owes much to a combination of factors seen internationally as being at the heart of school improvement. Academies share with American charter schools (privately run ‘public’ schools) their regulated independence: the DCSF ensures fair admissions, for example. Likewise, as with most US states’ policies on charter schools, academies are run on a not-for-profit basis. They each have a specialism, which has helped drive whole school improvement. But their leaders not only have more freedoms than other state schools, they also make more use of it. They vary the school timetable, with longer school days. They change their staffing structures and pay to suit their needs. Their governing bodies are more strategic, and strong sponsors don’t take ‘no’ for an answer. They are readier to innovate with the curriculum or the school organisation. And while it is true that other state funded schools have far more curriculum and pay flexibility than they realise or are ready to use, academy heads and staff seem more willing to use their unique freedoms – as well as those available to all schools – to a far greater extent because they feel they are trusted to do so.

In this book, we hear from academy pioneers: the principals of some of the most successful academies. Their stories are some of the stories of academies. The lessons they bring can also help us to understand where

education reform needs to go next, regardless of which party is in power. For anyone who was involved in the development of Labour's education policy from 1994 – and who remembers the bitter battles of the 1980s – a visit to an academy is a salutary experience. For behind the often iconic buildings, and the singular ethos of the staff and pupils, one can see the future of secondary education in action.

Conor Ryan is a writer and consultant. He was senior education adviser to Tony Blair (2005-7) and David Blunkett (1994-2001). He is author and editor of several books on education issues including 'Excellence in education: the making of great schools' (2004) and 'Staying the course' (2008). He contributes regularly to national media including The Today Programme on Radio 4, the Independent, the Guardian and Public Finance magazine. His blog is at www.conorfryan.blogspot.com.

Notes

- 1 Now the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.
- 2 'City Technology Colleges: conception and legacy', Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, 2007.
- 3 R Letwin, 'The anatomy of Thatcherism', 1993.
- 4 Around 1200 schools, including nearly 700 secondaries, had 'opted out' by the time Labour came to power.
- 5 This has since been reduced to £50,000 in sponsorship.
- 6 He did so in the Labour Party policy statement 'Diversity and excellence', 1995.
- 7 DFES Press Release 2001/0355, 9 October 2001.
- 8 Even today, CTC performance remains high. In 2007, they averaged 91 per cent five good GCSEs – or 70 per cent when English and maths were included. By comparison the comprehensive school average was 60 per cent five good GCSEs and 45 per cent including English and maths.
- 9 A Adonis, 'Speech to the National Academies Conference', February 2008.
- 10 DFEE Press Notice 2000/0106, 15 March 2000.

- 11 One example is St Francis of Assisi Academy in Liverpool.
- 12 Cited in Better Buildings, Better Design, Better Education (DFES, 2007) available at www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/resourcesfinanceandbuilding/News/General.
- 13 BBC News, 'Academies warning by head teachers', 9 September, 2002.
- 14 PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 'Academies evaluation: 4th annual report', 2007.
- 15 BBC News. "City academy failing, says Ofsted", 27 May 2005; Ofsted, 'Report on Unity City Academy, Middlesbrough', 9 May 2007 .
- 16 M Gove, 'Speech to CentreForum'. 25 March 2008 at www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj_id=143223.
- 17 N Clegg, 'Speech on public services', 14 January 2008 at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7187852.stm.
- 18 BBC News Online, 'Private bids for behaviour units', 20 May 2008.
- 19 Daily Telegraph, 'Cameron to let companies run schools', 31 May 2008.
- 20 DCSF, 'Promoting Excellence for All: School Improvement Strategy – raising standards, supporting schools', 2008.
- 21 DCSF Statistical Release SFR 34/2007, 18 October 2007.
- 22 Compared with predecessor schools: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/academies/what_are_academies/working/?version=1
- 23 Martyn Coles reports 10 applications for each place at his City of London Academy, see his chapter 'Governance and staffing, page 25.
- 24 Ofsted, 'Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills', 2007.
- 25 NAO, 'The academies programme', 2007.
- 26 PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 'Academies evaluation: 4th annual report', 2007.

Sponsors

Dan Moynihan

Private sector sponsors are sometimes criticised because they are not educationalists. This misses the point. The predecessor schools may have been run by educationalists, and yet they were unsuccessful. Sponsors do not need to be educational experts because they appoint a principal to run the schools, but they should bring high expectations and a track record of success. And they can help in creating a 'can-do' brand that supports success.

Our sponsor at The Harris Federation of South London Schools does not interfere in the operational work of the school. The seven rapidly improving south London city academies are sponsored by Lord Harris of Peckham, Chairman and Chief Executive of the Carpetright chain and a serial benefactor and sponsor of charitable causes.

Lord Harris visits regularly and he speaks with students and staff. As a successful leader in industry he knows how to motivate people and everybody connected with the school derives a 'buzz' from being connected with a sponsor. Philip Harris entered education by sponsoring one of the Conservative government's fifteen City Technology Colleges (CTCs) in 1990. In the face of initial suspicion as to his motives as a private sector sponsor, Lord Harris took on the running of the unsuccessful and unpopular Sylvan High School in South London. Results in 1990 were around 10 per cent with five or more good GCSEs. By the

mid 1990s, pass rates at the rebranded Harris CTC had improved to 60 per cent; in recent years, pass rates have been typically around 90 per cent each year.

The academy regularly receives 3,000 visitors to its annual open evening. In 2008 there were nearly 2,000 applications for 180 places and the school was recently judged to be 'outstanding' by the schools' inspectorate, Ofsted. This previously unsuccessful school has been transformed into one of the most popular state schools in England. It has been transformed because of the driving force of a committed private sector sponsor operating the school as an independent state school and not-for-profit charity.

Secrets of success at Harris Crystal Palace

At Harris Crystal Palace, the governing body comprises a range of people representing the community as well as business people who bring a sharper accountability than might normally be the case in the state sector. A key difference with other schools is that sponsors are not constrained by thinking inside the standard 'educational box'. For the sponsor, there are never problems or excuses that prevent things from happening, just situations which need solutions. It is this absolute expectation of success which makes the difference.

My experience of governing body meetings in local authority schools is that an inordinate amount of time is taken up with bureaucracy. The independence of academies from the bureaucratic culture of local authorities means that staff and governors can focus on what really counts – standards of achievement.¹ For example, a key factor behind the success of Harris Crystal Palace was early adoption of a data rich culture involving the setting of individual and class targets for students and careful

measuring and reporting of performance to students and parents, something only now becoming more common in other state schools. This approach was driven by sponsor governors' desire for accountability and clear information on the performance of the school.

Sponsoring multiple academies can replicate success

The flip side of our first school's success has been that each year over a thousand families fail to secure a place and are disappointed. Our initial aim was to try to overcome this problem by helping other schools to improve by working collaboratively with them. Unfortunately, we found that for this approach to be successful, it required staff in partner schools to support the need for change and possess the ability to make things happen. This was not always the case; and collaboration often does not work quickly enough.

When a school needs rapid improvement, we have found that the quickest way to bring this about and remove barriers to change is to overwrite the entrenched relationships, procedures and expectations of the predecessor school, all in one go, by re-creating the school as a completely new academy. Academy conversion is a powerful means to 'reboot' or restart a school toward rapid improvement.

In response to parental demand, Lord Harris' vision was to create a 'hard' federation (or single legal charitable entity) of seven Harris academies with plans to expand to twelve academies across south London. All the academies are located in areas of social deprivation; all except Harris CTC have historically low results. Together, the academies educate 8,000 pupils, with an annual budget of £50 million and 800 staff. Lord Harris is establishing a popular Harris brand in South London through academy conversion. Whilst such branding is common in business, it is highly unusual in education.

The structure of our federation is shown in figure 1. Lord Harris chairs the main Board which meets termly; it comprises the chairs of governors of individual academies and some non-executive directors. The Board carries the legal responsibility of governors and makes overarching strategic decisions as well as setting central policies. Each academy still has a local governing body, providing a mix of central and local direction. There is a small central federation office with a Chief Executive Officer, Director of Finance and Director of ICT.²

In January 2006, the Harris Federation agreed to undertake an accelerated conversion of Tamworth Manor High School, Merton to academy status, with the academy opening in the following September. After just one year, headline GCSE results improved by ten percentage points. A recent Ofsted monitoring report noted many improvements after only four terms and judged that the academy had an outstanding capacity for further improvement.

This rapid improvement was achieved by appointing a vice principal from Harris CTC as the principal of the new academy. All of the Harris CTC policies and procedures were imported to the new academy and have since been developed and 'tweaked' where appropriate to fit local circumstances. We transferred our 'house system' where assistant principals lead houses with groups of subject staff responsible for both the academic and pastoral welfare of students, removing the previous roles of heads of year. We also transferred an innovative 14-19 vocational curriculum, a tried and tested computerised system for tracking and monitoring individual students and behavior management systems. To boost post-16 achievement, we created a joint sixth form between three academies, importing established systems all in one go. We also operate joint staff training days

Figure 1:

Harris Federation
Main Board
Federation CEO
Director of Finance
Director of IT
Academies

Harris Bermondsey	Harris Peckham	Harris Girls' East Dulwich	Harris Crystal Palace	Harris South Norwood	Harris Merton	Harris Falconwood	Harris Boys' East Dulwich
2006	2003	2006	2007	2007	2006	2008	proposed 2009
PREDECESSOR SCHOOLS							
AYLWIN GIRLS	WARWICK PARK	WAVERLEY GIRLS	HARRIS CTC	STANLEY TECHNICAL	TAMWORTH MANOR	WESTWOOD COLLEGE	

which provide more training options across the academies. A team of Advanced Skills Teachers work across the schools. Two other academies which underwent an accelerated conversion opened in 2006; Harris Girls Academy East Dulwich and Harris Academy Bermondsey to join our existing Harris Peckham Academy in Southwark.

The sponsor, Lord Harris, has played a key role in championing the establishment of the new schools. His expertise and networks of contacts helped us to develop much more quickly than would otherwise have been the case. After opening the new schools, the sponsor has continued to provide valuable links with businesses and other organisations which have helped in developing the curriculum.

In September 2007, the federation opened the Harris Academy South Norwood. This £35 million new academy replaced another local school. In this case, we appointed a principal from outside the Harris organisation but deliberately based her at Harris Crystal Palace for the year prior to opening. By doing this, she was able to assimilate the systems and procedures there and adapt these as necessary. After the first year, improvement is evident to all, not least the students. All our schools are enormously oversubscribed and quickly improving.

The benefits of building a brand

In using academy conversion as a driver for change we have been able to bring about rapid improvement, sometimes in very challenging circumstances. The benefits of conversion and linking schools within the federation have included:

- Wider course choice, particularly for 14-19 options shared between schools.

- The sharing of expertise and best practice, for example the best work schemes and lesson plans among subject leaders.
- An enhanced extracurricular programme.
- More choice through a joint post-16 offer.
- The provision of support when needed, for example from the CEO and other principals.
- Reduced exclusions through 'managed moves'.
- Greater opportunities for staff promotion across the federation, including working in more than one academy.
- Joint training and professional development across the academies.

There are numerous operational benefits to be had from schools working together under one sponsor including:

- Economies of scale through central purchasing and improved human resources, site maintenance and legal support across the federation.
- A single, high quality ICT network and central management information systems.
- Central financial management.

Why should private sponsorship make a difference?

Traditionally, the local authority replaces the head teacher of a failing school. Critics of academies ask why this isn't enough, and why a sponsor is needed in addition. Consider the school culture in failing schools. The worst schools are placed in 'special measures' by inspectors. Other unsatisfactory but not failing schools are given a Notice to Improve. Counter-intuitively, research shows that schools in special measures improve more rapidly than those given a lesser notice to improve.³

Why this should be tells us something important about school culture. Schools in difficulty often possess a strongly unionised staff and operate with a culture of 'group think'. Resistance to change is often so strong that a new head teacher alone cannot easily overcome the range of reactionary forces in the school.⁴

When a school is placed in special measures, everybody is given notice that things need to change. A shock to the system is provided. This gives a head teacher sufficient momentum to introduce new ways of doing things. But when schools are given a notice to improve, they tend not to make such rapid progress even though they are more successful than those in special measures. The main reason seems to be that they lack the galvanising impact of a new beginning and raised expectations. Academy conversion supported by a private sponsor has the same impact on a school's culture in terms of providing a shock to the system and a realisation by all stakeholders that things must change. Sponsors bring hope, new possibilities, new ways of doing things and the expectation that improvement must happen. Being backed by a sponsor can also raise the self-esteem of a school and its community.

Appointing good governors

Our governing bodies have a majority of sponsor governors, together with parent and staff governors. Sponsor governors may be business people, community representatives or other governors with useful skills. In every case when a school becomes an academy, the governing body is created completely afresh. Business sponsors are sometimes criticised for having no personal experience of running schools. However, most local authority school governors have no personal experience of education either (other

than as a student). But sponsor governors also have the advantage of being highly successful people in their own right with the can-do approach to life which personal success brings. Lord Harris' attitude, and that of the other sponsor governors, is that it is possible to create success in any situation and that there are no insurmountable problems. This creates a culture of high expectations which feeds through into every corner of the school.

We are accountable

Academy opponents then claim that local people will lose their ability to hold their local school to account. They ignore the fact that the predecessor schools are usually academically unsuccessful and unpopular, which suggests that local accountability didn't work for them. In the end, the most useful and meaningful accountability is to national bodies like Ofsted.

As a leader in a variety of state secondary schools, I have found that local accountability usually means the representation of local councillors on the governing body; yet they may have no particular interest in education and may use the governing body to play out local party politics. And a local electorate rarely turns its ire on local politicians when a school fails. All too often, the structures for local accountability have no impact on performance and allow schools to continue to fail. The real choice for failing or weak schools is between an illusion of local accountability and the persistence of failure, or the introduction of a private sector sponsor and success. Moreover, private sector sponsors are fully accountable to Ofsted and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). Indeed, academies are inspected more regularly than most other schools in their first few years. Furthermore,

the DCSF ensures that School Improvement Partners appointed by them visit each term and report back.

Academy opponents claim that sponsors may wish to intervene in the curriculum and promote their own beliefs and political views. The experience of the Harris Federation is that other than asking that enterprise be one of the academy specialisms, our sponsor leaves the curriculum entirely to the educational professionals. Moreover, local councillors may be just as likely to interfere. Interference in the curriculum should be guarded against in all schools. With academies, the DCSF can flood any governing body with its own governors should the sponsor attempt to interfere in an inappropriate manner. This has never happened but remains an important safeguard.

Three of the four Harris academies with published examination results are in the top 500 nationally for pupil progress.⁵ The fourth school opened in 2006 and its results improved by 11 per cent after just one year. This performance, coupled with their huge popularity, provides clear evidence of the educational transformation that our private sector sponsorship is engendering.

Dan Moynihan is Chief Executive Officer of the Harris Federation of South London Schools, with responsibility for the establishment of new Harris academies and day to day operation of the federation of seven Harris schools. He was previously head teacher of two successful London schools both judged to be outstanding by Ofsted; Harris City Academy Crystal Palace and Valentine's High School in Ilford. He is an accredited inspector and school improvement partner. He is also the author of various school economics and business textbooks for Oxford University Press.

Notes

- 1 For more on this issue, see the chapter by Martyn Coles.
- 2 Information and Communication Technologies.
- 3 P Sammons and P Matthews, 'Survival of the weakest: the differential improvement of schools causing concern in England', *London Review of Education*, Vol.3 , July 2005.
- 4 D Moynihan, 'Headteachers can and do make a difference' in 'The leadership effect', Policy Exchange, 2007.
- 5 Data driven school transformation, SSAT, 2008.

Governance and staffing

Martyn Coles

Brisk and intelligent governance is essential to getting a new school open, to ensuring a smooth move to new premises and to expanding successfully from one year to the next. The sponsor controls academy governance and the freedom of the sponsor to decide the constituency of the board of governors is designed to promote efficiency and speedy decision making.

The size of the governing body varies, but most follow Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) guidance and all are transparent in their operation. Academy governing bodies generally range between six and sixteen governors and their powers are enshrined in the individual funding agreements drawn up between the individual academy and the government.

Governance and the City of London Academy – Southwark

The City of London Academy (COLA) was a new school that opened in temporary accommodation in September 2003 and moved into new buildings in 2005. I was appointed Principal in 2002 and started work in April 2003. The academy is now five years old and students took GCSE examinations for the first time in summer 2008. The school will have 1,200 students by September 2009, including 900 students aged 11-16 and 300 in the sixth form. The academy has met a serious need for good education in Bermondsey in South London. To date, it has been a success in this endeavour, being ten times oversubscribed for 180 places each year since it opened.

We are sponsored by the City of London Corporation and our governing body has fifteen governors, in the following categories:

- Four Corporation Common Councillors of the City of London.
- Four nominated representative governors from City businesses/institutions.
- Two parents (one from the City and one from Southwark).
- Two members of staff (one teaching and one support).
- One local authority representative.
- One DCSF representative.
- The principal.

I was a local authority head teacher of an east London community school for eight years. That school had a much larger (and more cumbersome) governing body. Meetings were longer and attendance more sporadic. Some governors were local politicians sitting on a number of governing bodies in addition to their council duties. It was not surprising that there were often occasions when they had not read the papers before arriving at the meeting; this meant that a lot of time was spent on “matters arising”.

Accordingly, I have found our academy governing body to be a remarkable improvement. Business is conducted at a good pace and the meeting is well chaired. But two features stand out as being really crucial to its success: efficiency and planning. The COLA governing body has two sub-committees, ‘finance and premises’ and ‘curriculum and community’. These committees deal with all the main governor business, including the annual budget, building plans, the development plan, and the school’s work with regeneration, business and local primary schools. The two

sub-committees then agree a decision to recommend to the governing body.

While this is a common feature of all schools, the difference with academies is that those committees are more likely to have a chair and members who are genuinely interested in effecting sustainable change and 'making a difference'. The main governing body meeting takes an overview of progress, and discussion can be wider and more detailed than is usual in many schools. For the principal, this process can be more demanding, yet also more valuable since the governing body is closely involved in policy and self evaluation is clearly at the heart of the school. The main governing body meeting then adopts or amends the recommendations from the committees.

Another difference lies in the way the governors do business. If a sub-committee member has a query about an issue currently under discussion, that governor will telephone me to get some clarity on the issue: they would regard it as wasteful to ask for such clarification in the governing body's main meeting.

This all makes for brisk and purposeful meetings. No COLA governing body meeting has ever lasted more than one hour and forty minutes. Members read papers, get clarification before the meeting and conduct the business with efficient attentiveness. Many have very influential jobs in the City, yet give their time freely to the school; and their way of working has influenced the governance. The DCSF would do well to look at providing such flexibility for all schools, both primary and secondary.

Staffing and Conditions of Service

Academies have greater flexibility than many other schools in staffing matters. They do not have to recognise trade

unions, do not have to follow national pay and conditions legislation and, on a slightly less central point to this chapter, until recently did not have to follow the national curriculum. Much of the freedom is allowed in the name of flexibility. While many of these freedoms are not used by all academies, we do have the freedom to *choose*. Many academies have their own pay structure with bonuses for good performance, most teach a longer school week, some have shorter holidays, all have a very robust performance management system with shorter tolerance for inadequate teaching.

On the other hand, the adoption of more standard procedures prevails if that is the appropriate course. Many academies follow common practice in staffing and pay procedures, exercising good common sense with regard to their staff and above all, the learning that the students can get. The key point is that the governors and senior team can choose. So, COLA recognises trade unions, pays teachers on the national pay scales and core staff on the City of London Corporation pay scales, follows the Burgundy Book conditions of service for teaching staff and has the same holidays as local authority schools. We believe that to do otherwise would create more work for little benefit. Again, the essential difference for the governors and principal of the academy is that we have the *choice*.

Staffing innovations

Where we have used our flexibility to great effect is in designing a new staffing structure, an innovative approach fully backed by our governors. The prime objective of any school is to ensure that the students learn as effectively as possible; understanding their academic subjects and the world that surrounds them. Their future success is the

school's success, the standard by which the teachers' skills are measured.

But there can be too many distractions, preventing the teachers from maximising their contribution to children's learning. I was very concerned, after two years, that the teachers were not spending enough time teaching the children. Some were being taken away from the classroom by jobs that were important but did not necessarily need teachers to carry them out, particularly on pastoral duties. Whatever their natural gifts, teachers are not trained in the support and guidance skills needed to do a pastoral job well.

We felt a different approach would benefit teachers and pupils alike. We recruited five pastoral managers, whom we later renamed "heads of year". Our first four recruits were ex-police officers, and our fifth was a former youth worker. They had the skills, child protection training and experience of the reality of London street life to make them excellent additions to the school staff. Their recruitment has been a great success, and they quickly became highly respected and valued. Our approach has been emulated in other schools, especially academies.

These lay heads of year have the time to meet and counsel parents: a parent is never told the head of year "won't be available until after school". They also visit primary schools and liaise with local agencies such as social services. Not unexpectedly, some younger teachers now want to be more involved in the pastoral side of the school, so we will probably create some assistant pastoral posts for these staff. But the policy and vision remain the same: some jobs in school can be done just as well, or even better, by non-teachers; these are our 'core' staff at COLA.

We take an innovative approach to other roles too.

Supervision in the playground and dining halls is carried out by 'year assistants', who also record lateness and administer parents' evenings, and are line managed by the heads of year. Two of these year assistants have become teachers and three are training as learning mentors. We employ a management information services manager, who is also the examination officer and oversees the production of all reports. He is a pivotal figure in the school, taking on roles often carried out by a vice principal. After all, shouldn't vice principals be using their expertise to enhance the learning of the students?

Freedoms for governance and staffing

Governance and staffing are two important areas where there is more freedom for academies. These are of course intricately linked. How we teach our students has a long term effect on the wealth and stability of our nation. It is thus vital that the academy solution is explored in full, particularly in relation to the governors who control these new schools and who they choose to lead, manage and teach in them.

Our experience at the City of London Academy offers an insight into how these freedoms can make a difference. And while this change has been encouraged by our funding agreements, it has been driven by the practical yet adventurous approach of governing bodies and senior leadership teams. The important role that governors take in the running of any school gives them a heavy responsibility for the futures of the country's children. Academy governance allows them to carry out this responsibility in an engaging and valuable way. By doing so, the governors enrich the learning of the student; their work and presence in school create an awareness that school is not in isolated

interlude but an ongoing part of life. This awareness allows students to view their school achievements as part of their future success rather than just achievements for their own sake. Of course, there are many other schools where the same might also be said, but I believe it is particularly true of academies and that is something for which our governors and staff can be particularly proud.

Martyn Coles has been Principal of the City of London Academy, Southwark since 2003. He was previously Head teacher of St. Paul's Way Community School and Arts College in Tower Hamlets for eight years. He is a member of the Council at the Institute of Education and the Head teachers' Reference Group at the DCSF.

Curriculum

Michael Wilshaw

A new approach to the curriculum and a stronger home-school contract have been important reasons for the success of Mossbourne Community Academy, the first city academy in east London, which opened in 2004 on the site of Hackney Downs School.

Hackney Downs had been a school with such low standards that it was branded by the Conservative government in the 1990s as the worst school in Britain. But with the freedoms the academies have brought with them, Mossbourne has been able to achieve remarkable improvements in standards.

One of the most important facets of academy status has been the freedom to modify the national curriculum by withdrawing identified children from some mainstream subjects. This has helped to raise standards by allowing the academy to focus on foundation skills and organise a range of literacy, numeracy and catch-up classes at Key Stage 3, particularly in Year 7 (aged 11 to 12).

Although some of the funding we receive to reflect our independence from the local authority is used to buy back services from that authority, much of it is retained to appoint additional high level teaching assistants. Under the guidance of the academy's special needs co-ordinator, they are developing a range of intervention strategies including reading recovery, accelerread/accelerwrite¹ and computer-

based individual learning programmes. As soon as youngsters reach their literacy and numeracy target levels, they return to the mainstream curriculum.

The academy's assessment and tracking systems show that pupils in Year 7 make remarkable progress. Having started with just 62 per cent of students achieving Level 4 (the national average) in English and maths, 90 per cent achieve the national average in the end of year progress tests. Some pupils who entered our academy without scoring in the Key Stage 2 national tests (last year in primary school) are now achieving the national average by the end of Key Stage 3 (age 14).

Mossbourne's Year 7 building, one of six small school learning areas, also facilitates transition arrangements from primary school. Pupils have their own dedicated space in the first year of secondary education, allowing staff to focus intensely on the needs of the transferring year group and ensure that they do not have as much movement around the academy as other year groups. This provides much needed stability at a time when many pupils see their learning suffer.

At the same time, our innovative nurture groups at Key Stage 3 (ages 11 to 14), taught mainly by primary trained teachers who are committed to these groups for 80 per cent of the curriculum, are having a major impact on attainment levels for our lowest achieving students including those with statements of special educational needs.

This curriculum work is complemented by an academy home-school contract that emphasises to parents that our expectations are high. Parents have to commit to the ethos of the academy, with its structured learning environment, immediate and effective sanctions (including Saturday morning detentions when necessary), a rigorous uniform

policy and a longer school day with a timetabled extension programme. Our sponsor, the late Sir Clive Bourne, played a crucial part in formulating this contract and made time to see parents, collectively and individually, to explain to them the rationale for each clause in the contract. Although the academy faced a number of objections from a small number of parents in the first year of operation, the fact that we now have full parental support for the contract is a testimony to parental perception of the academy as well as Sir Clive Bourne's powers of influence and huge degree of charm.

Grasping the Hackney nettle

Our independence is an important part of the success of such innovations, and they stand in sharp contrast with the history of our school site. After a series of very poor inspection reports an Education Association, appointed by then Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Shepherd, closed Hackney Downs in 1995 and allocated the children to other schools in Hackney and beyond. The site lay derelict until a decision was made by the Labour government in 2001 to demolish the old building and replace it with a new academy. The closure of Hackney Downs, although controversial at the time, was the right decision, and many would have argued that it was long overdue.

Thirteen years later, it is interesting to reflect on how the huge investment in education allied to the expectation that schools should be more open and accountable for performance, has led to a greater intolerance of failure. There is now both a political and professional consensus that schools with consistently low standards should close or be subject to structural change through amalgamation or federation with more successful schools. It is not

unreasonable to suggest, therefore, that in the present educational climate, Hackney Downs would not have languished for so long.

The failure of Hackney Downs and other secondary schools in Hackney, an ineffective local education authority and a mismanaged council cast a depressing spell over this part of London. As a consequence, a large number of Hackney pupils (40 per cent at the age of 11 and 70 per cent at 16) voted with their feet and decided upon educational provision outside the borough.

Radical decisions were needed to improve the educational opportunities for Hackney young people. In 2002, the then Secretary of State for Education, Estelle Morris, grasped the “Hackney nettle” by creating an independent not-for-profit education trust (The Learning Trust) in Hackney, chaired by Sir Mike Tomlinson, the former chief inspector of schools. The Trust’s mission is to raise standards in Hackney across the phases and to ensure that Hackney parents have confidence in local schools. The Trust quickly saw the opportunity provided by the academy capital programme to replace underperforming secondary schools as well as creating additional school places. Five academies are planned and three already open in exciting new buildings.

The birth of Mossbourne

Mossbourne, the first of the developing academy programme, is sponsored by a Trust set up by Sir Clive, a successful Hackney-born entrepreneur and businessman, who wanted to put something back into the community from which he came. Opening in 2004 with one year group of 180 students, we are building year on year into a 1,200 11-18 academy. We currently have four year groups

at Mossbourne with our Year 10 students preparing for GCSE examinations next year. Working in a beautiful Richard Rogers designed building, the academy is proving to be extremely popular, with over 1,400 applications for 180 places in Year 7. The pupil intake is genuinely comprehensive reflecting the Hackney profile at secondary transfer. Some 34 per cent of students are on the special needs register, including 55 students with statements of SEN. Over 40 per cent of students are entitled to free school meals and 38 per cent of children have English as a second language. The school population is representative of Hackney and is ethnically and socially diverse.

Although many of our students are socially disadvantaged, Mossbourne is achieving well above national norms. Our first public examination results at Key Stage 3 put us at the head of the value added national league table, with over 90 per cent of students achieving at least a Level 5 (the expected level) in the core subjects of English, maths and science. These remarkable results show that students are making at least four terms' more progress than the national average. Ofsted recognised our achievements when it described Mossbourne as 'outstanding' in their inspection report of 2006.²

Using our freedoms to support learning

Mossbourne is achieving success not only by engaging in good educational practice but also by fully using the freedoms given to the leadership and governance of academies. In addition to our innovative curriculum and our home-school contract, this independence is also reflected in a staff contract that encourages curricular innovation and supports our freedom to reward our staff better.

Sir Clive and the Hackney Learning Trust were insistent

from the start on providing a staff contract which did not prescribe hours of work but simply required staff to commit themselves to the ethos of the academy and the curriculum, and organisational structures that would meet the needs of the students. The Trust's view was that a no-hours contract should treat professionals as professionals. A 32-hour teaching week, curriculum extension for students below level, additional literacy and numeracy booster classes, and Saturday morning activities, are very much seen as part of every member of staff's professional duties. Without a longer teaching day and a structured extension programme, our students would not be achieving their present levels. The staff recognise this. The Trust has encountered little or no opposition to the contract from the professional associations because we have ensured that staff are not overloaded and that contact ratios and cover duties are kept at reasonable levels. Meetings are kept to a minimum and often take place before school so that staff can fully engage in our extension programmes.

The welfare of staff is given a high priority at Mossbourne and each Head of Learning Area is, within a devolved management structure, given the responsibility of ensuring that newly qualified teachers and those in the early years of the profession are given maximum support. Although there is no central staff room at Mossbourne, staff work collaboratively in departmental teams in each Learning Area.

Moreover, the academy's freedom to develop our own pay and conditions policy has meant that we have been able to reward staff for working these long hours by offering not only competitive salaries but also a range of incentives including end of year performance related bonuses, relocation costs, subsidies for childcare and Trust approved staff loans. These financial incentives have not

only boosted morale but have also helped to retain good staff who might otherwise have left London because of the capital's high living costs.

Sir Clive and the Learning Trust played a big part in the academy's success and in the development of our curriculum. Sir Clive, who sadly died in January 2007, devoted huge amounts of time to setting up the academy and worked with me and other members of the Trust on its educational vision. He had a large network of business associates and friends who could advise the academy on a range of issues from human resources to finance and fundraising.

Sir Clive was hungry for success and intolerant of red tape and the petty bureaucracy which sometimes stands in the way of progress. He made weekly, and sometimes daily, visits to the academy. The students, staff and parents, hugely appreciated his interest. He was passionate that Mossbourne should succeed and deliver for Hackney children. Although his own experience of school was far from good, Sir Clive understood the importance of education in an increasingly competitive world. He was insistent, for example, that the academy's specialism should be Information and Communication Technology so that youngsters living on the 'doorstep' of the City of London and Canary Wharf could gain the necessary skills to acquire a job in the ever expanding financial services industry.

Clive is sorely missed but the Trust, under its new Chair, Sylvie Pierce, continues his good work. Its members provide support and challenge and are ambitious that we should achieve excellent GCSE results to build on the outstanding Key Stage 3 scores (our target at GCSE is that 80 per cent of pupils should achieved at least 5 A*-C grades, including

English and maths). If we hit this target not only will our value added scores be extremely high, but our Year 11 students can look forward to continuing their education at Mossbourne in a brand new sixth form building to be completed in 2009.

The success of Mossbourne and the popularity of the other academies are changing the image of Hackney. More parents are opting to keep their children in Hackney schools and the academy programme has injected a new dynamism into local provision, helping to lever up standards at both Key Stages 3 and 4 in secondary schools across the borough. Mossbourne has replaced failure with success. We are demonstrating that we can raise standards by implementing the central vision of academies – that with independence, innovation in our curriculum, entrepreneurial leadership, and sheer hard work we can make a lasting difference to the lives of children in disadvantaged areas.

Sir Michael Wilshaw is Principal of Mossbourne Community Academy and is seconded as Director of Education at ARK, a charitable education trust, which is developing a number of academies in London and Birmingham. Sir Michael has been a secondary head teacher for 22 years in inner London. From 1985-2003 he was Head of St Bonaventure's school in Newham. He was knighted in 2000 for services to education. As a recently designated National Leader in Education, Sir Michael is often asked to speak on school improvement issues. Sir Michael has been asked to mentor a number of principals, as well as providing advice to the DCSF on academy-wide issues. He was a member of the Advisory Committee for the recently published Children's Plan.

Notes

- 1 A computer-based programme that uses structured phonics to improving reading and writing.
- 2 www.ofsted.gov.uk

All-through academies

Richard Gilliland

The concept of an all-through academy – where children are in education from the age of three to eighteen – seemed revolutionary when we suggested it as a model for Lincoln. Of course, the idea was hardly new. Many public schools have long operated an all-through system and some of the top ranking nations in the various international leagues, including Finland, have all-through schools as the norm. And with good reason: children moving from primary to secondary often experience regression; moreover, it has been shown that the disruption, lack of continuity and the need for the secondary school to reassess and re-group have led to this phenomenon. Year 7 is often, at best, a holding year; at worst it is a year where children go backwards, not least in basic skills.

Benefits from an all-through approach

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds can often feel these pressures more keenly than others. If their home lives are not settled, school can be the stabilising influence on their lives. Any disruption to that pattern can have a negative impact on progress. In considering the whole concept of an all-through academy however, there is not a great deal of hard evidence either for or against the concept within the English state sector. The National College for School Leadership has undertaken research into existing all-age schools and

identified that their benefits included a reduction in barriers to learning and students often had a greater understanding of their community.¹

From a management perspective, they identified the benefits of distributed leadership and the fact that staff were invigorated by the fact that all through academies are seen as new and exciting.² From an economic perspective they were seen as being exceptionally good value for money.

To some extent the decision to embark on an all-through academy is an act of faith. But acts of faith do not need to be blind; they can be based on common sense. And common sense would suggest that creating an environment where children are known from a very early age, where parents are known and involved in a school community for longer periods, where relationships can be built up and trust developed, including, where necessary, giving additional support to families to enable them to do their very best for their children, will all lead to advantages for the children.

Research looking at all-age schools elsewhere in the world has indicated that where the key principles of an all-age school are well developed, these schools have stunning success. The principle regarded as key to success is involving everyone in a participative approach to the education of the young people and, through this, developing a sense of ownership of a community school. This enables the school to become more engaged in the community and the parents more involved in the life of the school. This enhances the children's educational experience. By ensuring community development is a central part of an all-age academy a learning culture can be developed which benefits all, not just those of school age. The successes identified from projects in other parts of the world have indicated that often all-age schools help to improve school attendance,

pupil motivation and performance, especially in literacy. One of the reasons for this is the increased involvement of parents, the increased quality of teaching and the increased levels of confidence amongst the students.

Our plans for the Witham Academy

The Witham Academy will comprise the current Joseph Ruston Technology College, Moorland Infant and Usher Junior Schools. The new build is scheduled to be completed in 2010, but for the first two years of our existence as an academy we will operate on the existing sites. The intention is that ultimately the academy will provide education from pre-school to 19 and, when full, will have a student population of about 1,000. The academy's specialisms will be business studies and enterprise and performing arts. We are particularly keen to develop an experiential learning approach to the teaching of business studies and enterprise and are fortunate to have a partner school in Bruneck in Italy that we can work with in a highly innovative approach to the teaching of this subject. In Bruneck the business school operates a 'virtual firm' approach to teaching, creating, quite literally, premises and posts, and trade with a wider network of schools in northern Italy, southern Germany and Austria. There are quite spectacular trade fairs held, normally in Innsbruck, and we are looking forward to being involved as an associate member.

We will set up our own virtual firm, based upon a purpose built facility, and hope to begin 'trading' with our partner schools very early on in our life as an academy. This approach is highly effective in enabling young people to grasp the realities of working in a business environment.

Similarly, with performing arts we are looking forward to the opportunity to develop what is already a sound basis

of provision. We hope that by developing these facilities we can also encourage even more community involvement in our academy. Crucial to the ultimate success of our project is that we are very much a community based academy. We will be working very closely with the adjacent community centre to enhance and develop further opportunities for local people to avail themselves not only of our facilities, but of opportunities in a whole variety of ways. Through this involvement, we believe that there will be a very positive impact on perceptions of young people on education in general and this will help us in our drive to raise standards.

Overcoming parental concerns

Parents inevitably have genuine fears and the press does much to create an image of the adolescent 'hoody' as a figure of fear and terror. Therefore, some parents find the thought of having young adolescents mixing with their vulnerable five year olds daunting. However all the anecdotal evidence suggests that the older students react very positively to being involved with younger students and can assume a much more responsible attitude when around younger children.

Certainly, the evidence we have to date is that this is exactly what happens. Students like to take responsibility, they like to mentor, and they like to help in organising activities such as sports events, clubs and extracurricular activities. Creating an all-through academy which is based on a house system that includes children of all ages in closer and closer ties creates a strong 'family' bond.

Enabling teachers to develop close working relationships with parents and families over a longer period and allowing agencies to work with the school with a greater

degree of certainty about the future does impact positively. Quite often the parents of disadvantaged children have themselves had very negative experiences of school. That pattern continues when their contact with their child's school primarily involves the school complaining about the behaviour or progress of their children.

Belonging to a group

An all-through atmosphere engenders a sense of belonging to a group. And that is something that continues through into the secondary school. We are all familiar with stories of parents talking at the gates and becoming involved in the primary school fundraising activities and support of their school generally. But that sense of parental involvement too often dissipates as children get older: their involvement in their children's secondary school is very different from that in most primary schools. An all-through academy allows that very strong desire that parents have to be involved to continue into the secondary phase. This opportunity to keep that close relationship going, backed by a continued personal touch of teachers and staff chatting, informally keeping parents 'in the loop', seems to be crucial to addressing the important issues that will affect the child's future.

Of course, there are practical issues that need to be overcome; very simple issues such as arranging dining for everyone. A 16-year old boy needs very different dining facilities from a 5-year old reception child. However, these are all issues that can be met with imagination, in creating the appropriate facilities, but the ability to share facilities as well as being cost effective, does enhance opportunities for all the students. Moreover, there are obvious advantages in providing the opportunity for primary age children to

have the benefit of secondary school expertise in specialist subjects such as technology, science and sport. Perhaps what are less obvious are the benefits that primary teachers and the primary experience can bring to the secondary school in their creation of a different educational climate and an environment which makes young people feel more comfortable. It has often been remarked upon by Ofsted inspectors how inviting primary schools can be when, for example, children's work is widely on display, often in marked contrast to secondary schools. Similarly, primary school teachers inevitably have to take a holistic approach to the children's education while in the secondary school it can be fragmented. Indeed, the move from a holistic primary education to a fragmented secondary approach is one of the reasons cited for difficulties in transition at the age of 11.

Joint experiences in a team approach

The creation of an all-through school can enable the skills and experiences of both primary and secondary sectors to be brought together for the benefit of the children. From a professional development point of view the opportunities are endless and staff within Witham Academy are already looking forward to the opportunities to taste life in another sector of the educational world. The experiences gained can only enhance the individual member of staff's skills and abilities.

In sum, the all-through model provides a win-win situation for everyone. It allows for the cost effective use of facilities and for the creation of a community school in the widest sense. By embracing the Every Child Matters agenda, as well as the concept of extended schools, we believe we will be able to make real progress in raising

standards and in breaking the cycle of deprivation which has bedevilled so many disadvantaged communities over the past decades. At Witham Academy we are convinced this is the way forward and we look forward to more and more academies joining the ranks of the all-through schools.

Richard Gilliland is currently the Head of The Priory Lincolnshire School of Science and Technology (LSST) and the Executive Head of Joseph Ruston Technology College. Before becoming the Head of The Priory in 1997 he was a head teacher for nine years in Derby and previously a Deputy Head at De Aston School in Lincolnshire, St Johns School in Episkopi, Cyprus and Gloucester School in Hohne, Germany. In September 2008 he will become the Executive Head of The Priory Federation of Academies Trust which will incorporate The Priory Academy LSST, The Priory Witham Academy and The Priory City of Lincoln Academy. The Witham Academy will be an all-through academy; the other two academies will be 11 to 18.

Notes

- 1 H Swidenbank, 'The challenges and opportunities of leading and managing an all-age school', NSCL, 2007.
- 2 Professor Alma Harris defines distributed leadership as leadership at all levels in an organisation which is extended and enhanced to build organisational capacity.

Community

Philip O’Hear

Our linguistic, religious and cultural diversity enriches Capital City Academy, in Brent, North London. We are proud of the harmony, mutual interest and respect shown by our students. Nonetheless, the range and nature of the student population poses significant challenges. Our locality includes some of the most deprived in Britain and the community suffers from high rates of ill health, teenage pregnancy and gun and knife crime.

We meet these challenges by engaging our local community and drawing into our school every role model of success we can identify or create. We want the communities we serve to see the school as their place for learning and development.

Capital City Academy opened in September 2003, replacing a predecessor school where an average of just 12.5 per cent of pupils gained five good GCSEs in its last three years of operation. 92 per cent of our students have an ethnic minority background (with 45 communities represented) or were born overseas. Our three largest ethnic groups are Black Caribbean (17 per cent), Black Somali (10 per cent) and White British (7 per cent) but our pupils’ backgrounds extend across the world. As an academy, popularity with parents has brought more local and stable cohorts, but many of our pupils don’t stay the course. Our high pupil mobility reflects the considerable

population churn in the area: 30 per cent of students taking their GCSE exams joined after the start of Year 7.

Some are critical of academies because they say our independence from the local authority means we are not rooted in the community. But our school's policies reflect a strong community outlook – and the diversity of our student population. Our lettings include several local church groups and a number of community sports clubs. We also heavily subsidise two educational projects through peppercorn rents: a local supplementary school and a Somali community school. We host and attend the local Neighbourhood Watch group meetings. And, thanks to a generous donation from one of our trustees, we are working with a local refugee support project.

Sporting success for our students and the community

Academies each have specialist subjects, as with most other secondary schools. Ours are in sports and arts, and engagement of the local sports and arts communities has played a big role in raising standards and lifting the school's profile in the community. 180 of our students (some admitted on the basis of sports aptitude, for which we reserve up to 10 per cent of our places each year; others identified by the school) are in junior athlete performance programmes. Their regular contact with high level coaches has another benefit: it regularly brings these successful adults into the academy. In a unique partnership, the school is the home of London Capital Basketball, the only London club in the British Basketball League. This semi-professional adult club provides basketball opportunities to our male and female students, with many of its top players coaching them. The club is engaged with the school at several levels: it is contracted to provide out-of-hours

security; and suitably qualified players act as teaching assistants or cover supervisors. In these ways sport brings powerful role models of success to our school, many of whom have similar backgrounds to our students.

As with specialist schools, we receive additional funding for our sports specialism.¹ We use some of that funding to pay for an athletics coach who has helped the neighbouring Willesden Sports Centre to develop a combined community and performance programme for young people in athletics. Top British national coaches provide a stunning programme, which is free to our students. We have extended both the programme at the sports centre and the opportunities for the community by brokering similar deals with other local schools. We also work closely with local primary schools, holding a major primary school sports night once a week at our school and the centre. Our successful identification of sporting talent has led us to be invited and funded by London Gifted and Talented to run a sub-regional summer camp for talented Year 6 sports students from west London.² Our approach to talent identification and our delivery of a programme which reflects students' different learning styles and sporting skills has been reflected in gifted and talented work in sport across west London.

Specialist sports colleges also receive additional government funding to act as hub schools for local School and Community Sports Partnerships. We receive such funding to encourage more young people in our part of London to become actively involved in sports, supporting 38 local schools in a partnership ranked in the top 5 per cent nationally by the Youth Sport Trust. The strength of our work is reflected in a substantial increase in the number of young people doing at least two hours a week of

high quality PE and sport, from 68 per cent to 91 per cent of students across the partnership. As a result, our Director of Sport is now funded by Youth Sport Trust to support all academies in London with a sports specialism. In 2007 our school was also awarded the coveted Sportsmark.

Building success in the arts

We are now replicating this model in the arts. We are a hub school for the Creative Partnerships programme which funds students to work with local artists. Last year, all our Year 7 students took part in a 'dream school' project – an off-site week where artists ran workshops exploring their art and issues of identity. Our arts partnerships extend also to major national bodies, including the Royal Opera House, English National Ballet and Garden Opera. Taken together, this work speaks success to our students while widening their horizons. The range and quality of our work in the arts has been recently recognised by the award of Artsmark Gold.³ From September 2008, we have established a senior post for the development of a school and community partnership in the arts.

Extracurricular work – supporting our local library

Extending student opportunity is fundamental to our vision. We use our freedom as an academy to pay staff a supplement in return for a commitment to a very considerable extracurricular offer of booster classes and clubs. This framework allows the regular involvement of increasing numbers of sport and arts partners alongside more formal curriculum based projects. Closely related to our work on the arts has been the prominence we give to the encouragement of reading. Our professional librarian and our literacy coordinator (both now recognised

by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust as lead practitioners) have developed a tremendous programme of reading and author-led events in the school in partnership with the Brent Library Service. This has not only led to our students being invited to help in the redesign of the children's section of the Willesden public library but, more importantly, to significant increases in the number of books taken out from the school library by both boys and girls.

Promoting student leadership skills

Leadership at all levels is a key part of our achievement strategy. And it has a strong community dimension. In 2003, we offered sixth formers who were identified as talented athletes the opportunity to work as midday supervisors; they got a good lunch as part of their remuneration. When this worked exceptionally well, we extended the scheme initially to other sixth formers and more recently to Year 10 and 11 students. There is a formal application process, with a job description and person specification and training. Lunchtime supervision and students' contribution to the community were identified as outstanding by Ofsted in 2006. The programme builds a range of skills that will enable our students to apply for jobs and to show leadership in roles outside the school.

Almost half of our pupils gain accreditation in leadership. And sporting, language and arts events, where our students teach primary school students, are a regular feature of our school life. We have trained peer mentors and reading buddies. We employ a growing number of current and ex-students, some on their gap year, as teaching assistants, ICT apprentices, lunchtime supervisors and part time administrators. This has had a huge cultural impact on the school, where staff and students now expect and rely on

student leadership. The student leaders are themselves role models of success from the school community.

Partnerships in teacher professional development

Recruiting, retaining and developing staff is critical. But by recruiting more widely than traditional routes and working with others on professional development, we have benefited our own school and the wider school community. As a new and expanding school, and with teachers still hard to find in London, we have had to expand and develop our staff through schemes such as Teach First and the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP).⁴ Some of our staff join us as volunteers, become teaching assistants and then take up places on the GTP scheme. We also employ some people in leadership positions who have come straight from non-teaching jobs.

This requires us to be outstanding at professional development. But it has also led us to encourage staff to develop rapidly by taking on leadership responsibilities, drawing on the experience of our first cohort of Teach First trainees who successfully took on additional responsibilities in their second year.

We now have many junior teachers with one or two other significant responsibilities – transition co-ordinator, deputy head of year or running our Microsoft Academy. We used our freedom as an academy to develop our own management allowance scheme. This gives us the flexibility to award and reward responsibility as staff become ready for it. As these colleagues become successful in leading, they continue to grow and develop rapidly. This strengthens the ethos of the school as a community of learning.

Professional development and system leadership is not bound by what we can do alone. As Excellence in Cities came to an end in Brent, I proposed that we established a

borough wide Education Improvement Partnership (EIP) and was elected chairperson.⁵ In its initial year (2006-07) the EIP agreed to exchange school achievement data, shared good practice on raising standards for underachieving ethnic groups and steered the borough's approach to 14-19 development. Since then, it has worked to develop a Fair Access policy for newly arrived overseas students and the local special educational needs strategy.

As part of the overall development of partnership working within Brent, Capital City Academy was also a founding member of the South Brent Education Improvement Partnership made up of five non-faith schools serving the mobile and disadvantaged South Brent community. We work together to strengthen the opportunities for our community. Over the last three years, we have developed a common drug education and discipline policy, held a combined staff training day (hosted in the academy) on personalised learning, agreed a structure for 14-19 collaboration across all five schools, and delivered joint training for all our middle and senior leaders on the use of data to improve achievement.

In 2007, we won the Secondary School Admission Test Chief Executive's Award for the specialist school which has made the most significant impact on its family of schools. After shortlisting, we were asked to provide detailed evidence of what we had done. Staff from another academy, Brent local authority, another west London authority, a local primary school and a secondary school in our sports partnership all gave up their time to confirm the positive impact of our work in the partnerships I have tried to describe in this chapter. For me, this evidence confirmed that our community approach is of real value.

A community focus contributes to our academic success

But, the bottom line of everything in our academy has to be the impact on our own students. After all, they only have one chance for success at school. And our community focus has contributed to successful outcomes. Attendance at over 93 per cent in 2007/08, is up from below 89 per cent in 2003/4 and lower still in the predecessor school. At GCSE, 53 per cent of Year 11 achieved five good GCSEs in 2006; the average for our first four years has been 32.5 per cent – almost three times that of the predecessor school with very similar student cohorts. At GCSE and A-level, we have begun to demonstrate very high added value: our 2006 Key Stage 2 to 4 value added score was in the top 5 per cent of schools nationally.

Does this reflect our commitment to developing partnerships? I hope this chapter has given a sense of how our partnerships have brought inspirational examples of success to our school and have added new dimensions to our work at all levels. Allow me to conclude with one last thought. Our independence makes for stronger partnerships because they all rest on genuine commitment on both sides to achieve mutual benefit. There is nobody forcing us to take part in partnerships. And it is the strength of our partnerships, our work on student leadership and our relentless commitment to improving teaching and learning which are our three magic bullets for transforming the lives of our students.

Philip O'Hear is Principal of Capital City Academy in Brent, London. He joined the academy in September 2004 and the school was judged by Ofsted in March 2006 as a school

“with many strengths” and good capacity for continued improvement. In 2007, the school achieved its best results to date at Key stage 3, GCSE and A-level. Prior to joining the academy, Philip was Director of Education in Hillingdon, Assistant Director in Camden and headteacher of Acland Burghley School in Camden. He is a teacher of English and has been a chief examiner for GCSE English. He has written on the curriculum for the Institute for Public Policy Research.

Notes

- 1 This is currently worth £129 per pupil each year.
- 2 An umbrella body for work with gifted and talented pupils in London state schools.
- 3 The Artsmark is awarded to schools by the Arts Council of England to recognise outstanding commitment to the arts. Artsmark Gold is the top award.
- 4 Teach First is a programme whereby graduates spend two years teaching in an urban school, after which they may return to another career or continue teaching. The GTP is a programme where people who have been working can switch to teaching, being paid a small salary while training in a school.
- 5 A government programme of urban school reform.

Technology

Mark Grundy

The creation of Shireland Collegiate Academy has led to a radical change in school structure, curriculum and – probably most significantly – the use of new technologies over the last decade. We have used technology to give young people from all backgrounds the chance to take full advantage of modern technology. As a result, we have seen real improvements in results.

Our academy is situated in Sandwell in the West Midlands, one of the most deprived boroughs in the country. Shireland serves wards with high unemployment, significant health problems and a history of underachievement at all age levels, despite the outstanding efforts of a number of local schools.

In the last decade, we have changed from a modest comprehensive, initially to a specialist school (placing particular emphasis on the use of new technology and the teaching of languages) and more recently into a partner academy in the Collegiate Academy Trust. The Trust, comprising two academies – Shireland and George Salter – was established in September 2007.

Building a new learning network

When I came to Shireland in 1997, attainment was low and teachers were finding it very difficult to engage with families. We all knew that it would be necessary to make some big

changes to persuade parents and the local community to get involved with the school, and to use such engagement to help raise attainment. We spent a significant amount of time talking to our local partners, including local primary school head teachers, community representatives and, most importantly, our school community – the staff, students and families.

Above all, we realised we needed a network. So, we were delighted when in 1998, we secured £1 million of regeneration funding to set up the Smethwick Learning Network – an initiative which enabled Shireland to deliver English and mathematics resources to students in other schools and community venues in the area. The network was the first of its kind and a hugely exciting project. Through an Integrated Learning System¹ we were able to link our secondary school with one other secondary, 17 primary schools, six community venues and two libraries.

Teachers and pupils could access online work plans anytime, anywhere, and the project proved highly successful in helping to engage pupils and improve literacy and numeracy skills. The network was our attempt to develop a strategic technological framework which could support school improvement. In many ways it was the precursor to our Learning Gateway developments which have been much praised in recent years.

Right from the start we tried to use technology as a medium to join people together, as we were acutely aware that we could not maximise any individual student's talents on our own. Technology can be a wonderful leveller, but for it to be used effectively it is vital that all learners have access to it, both in the classroom and beyond the school gates. Our cluster of schools became part of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) ICT test bed, and we were

given the opportunity to show how such systems could work.

Bridging the digital divide

Our school had a serious digital divide. Some pupils had access to IT at home, whereas others did not. To bridge that divide, we arranged for personal computers to be set up in 2,000 pupils' homes, along with broadband connections for those without one. Every family attended a training session to deal with any problems that might arise. We also established clusters of PCs in local community venues attended by our students and their families. We encouraged the venues – which included a local mosque – to set up homework clubs and to allocate weekly time slots where the PCs could be used for learning and communication with the school.

Suddenly, all of our learners were able to work with appropriate technology in a time and place that suited them. Our scheme gave each of our pupils an equal opportunity to take full advantage of the technology on offer. Providing computers and internet access for our pupils and community venues was a huge step, but new pieces of technology are not enough on their own.

Such innovation was but a precursor to our most radical change. In 2004 we set up the Shireland Learning Gateway, a very different style of online portal with separate sections for teachers, pupils and parents to access educational resources and learning activities from any computer linked to the internet, anywhere in the world. The Gateway provides individual email and calendars, personalised 'My Site' spaces, document sharing functions and the tools to manage blogs and wikis.

An innovative learning gateway

The Shireland Learning Gateway allows teachers to set online assignments for students, which can be automatically marked, with results sent to pupils instantly. Before we set up the Gateway, our staff were frustrated at how much time they lost looking for important information; they now have access to private areas which contain document libraries and links to essential resources. In 2007, we set online homework for all of our Year 7 students. We provided three automatically marked learning units per week for most of the year and the results were staggering. Not only did the entire year group complete more homework than we had ever seen before but their families logged in to see how they were doing.

Our pupils really value their 'student portal' on the Gateway, and it currently gets 1 million hits each term. We try to mirror the look and feel of sites that pupils use in their free time, such as Facebook and Bebo, so the personalised spaces we provide are engaging to use. Being able to log on at any time and from anywhere means pupils are in control of their learning. Pupils who miss classes can also log on to pick up homework assignments. Gone are the days when pupils could only learn during the formal school day.

One reason why we are so keen on technology at Shireland is that it does not judge – it can support our pupils' learning without embarrassing them. Pupils feel less apprehensive about being tested on the Learning Gateway because the assessment methods are less formal. They can succeed or fail in private, which makes them more willing to take part. Technology of this kind engages pupils and builds their confidence.

The Learning Gateway has had a major impact on communication with parents, who can use it easily to find

out about their child's target grades, punctuality and merits. It is not just about telling parents where their children could do better – pupils often keep achievements to themselves, so it is a great way to make sure that parents know when their children are doing well.

We have developed online learning resources for families, too, and these are vital in raising engagement and attainment at the school. Increasing literacy and numeracy among parents has meant that they, in turn, can help their children to learn. Families can also receive their own learning units from the Shireland Gateway – mostly aimed at improving adult literacy and numeracy – along with additional services such as health advice and even job opportunities in their local community.

We only see our pupils for six hours a day, but we need parents to help their children for the remaining time. When we introduced the Gateway, some parents were sceptical about whether it would really work, but more and more are logging on and taking advantage of the resources it offers. Engagement from families is one of the most important factors in a child's education. People often underestimate how important parents can be in helping their children to learn and develop.

The power of technology for academies

Technology is a hugely powerful tool which can transform teaching and learning when deployed in the right way. Yet all too often we introduce technology without properly considering the context in which it will be used. Then we wonder why learners do not succeed and staff freeze. Our pupils have grown up with the internet, mobile phones and MP3 players, and we need to harness their enthusiasm for technology and use it to engage them in learning.

When pupil motivation and parental engagement are low in a school, it is often because teachers do not have enough time to communicate with pupils and their families. Giving pupils and their families access to the internet and, in particular, to the resources available on the Learning Gateway, has been absolutely crucial in ensuring parents and pupils are empowered, engaged and truly feel part of the school community.

We have used new technologies to support the development of our staff, students and community. The independence that we now have as academies will allow us to continue to drive our use of technology forward. We are hopeful that we will be able to support others on the same journey. There are a number of key initiatives that we feel that we can support. One of the potentially most challenging, but profitable, could be the government's aspiration to replicate our Gateway approach through universal home access to a school based learning platform for all young people.

The possibility of providing the most deprived homes across the country with a personalised learning platform, with the capacity to support both students and their families, is precisely what we believe academies were designed to enable. Embedding technology in homes as well as classrooms has got to be our goal if every young person, whatever their background, is to achieve his or her potential.

Sir Mark Grundy was head teacher of Shireland Language College and Sixth Form Centre from April 1997 until September 2007, when he became Executive Principal of Shireland Collegiate Academy and George Salter Collegiate Academy when both schools became academies within a

collegiate partnership known as The Collegiate Academy Trust. In 2003 he was seconded part time to work in ICT in the Schools Division of the DCSF and to act as a member of the School Diversity Task Group. He was one of the deputy head teachers who worked on the Dearing Review and was a member of QCA Secondary Task Group for Curriculum 2000. Sir Mark was also a member of the Universal Home Access Task Force reporting to the Schools Minister, Jim Knight, from Spring 2007 until May 2008. He was knighted in 2006.

Notes

- 1 An interactive mix of computer hardware and software used to support teaching and learning.

Boarding

Anthony Seldon

No other country has such a glaring gap between a well funded independent school system that dominates places at top universities and national life, and a state school system that, however much it improves, is unable to catch up. This is why I believe it is important that independent schools support academies, and why more young people in the state sector should benefit from a boarding experience.

Wellington College, an independent school in Berkshire founded by Queen Victoria and the prime minister in 1859 as a national memorial to the Duke of Wellington, decided in 2006 that it would sponsor an academy. Our governors were attracted by the idea of extending opportunities similar to those available at Wellington to a wider group of students educated in the state system. They were impressed by the argument that the ‘DNA’ of Wellington College could be deployed elsewhere to inform the founding ideals and purpose of a new state school.

In our case, that means a commitment to all-round education, our eight aptitudes,¹ pupil well-being, outdoor activities and the Combined Cadet Force. The academy would also have a strong house system, with the house names at Wellington College replicated, and boarding. 700 of our 850 pupils are boarders. It is very much in our genes.

Finding the right partner

We held discussions with the Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Children, Schools and Families) in late 2006, and were excited when they suggested linking Wellington College with Castledown School near Ludgershall in Wiltshire. Initially we had expected somewhere closer, but we were convinced by the arguments that there was potential here for a fruitful partnership. The school had been in difficulties for a while but had come out of special measures and was beginning to flourish under a new head. We were in business, but before anything could happen, we had to find sponsorship.

The idea of an academy with a relatively high proportion of pupils from service families (40 per cent of the total at the existing school) was the brainchild of Dame Mary Richardson of HSBC. Our initial hope was that HSBC would produce the £2 million then required but they were already heavily committed to academies elsewhere, and for six months we were struggling. Out of the blue, in early 2007, two of our former pupils – Tim and Sarah Bunting – announced that they would be willing to donate the £2 million. Progress then was rapid, and in March 2008, we appointed the Principal Designate, Andy Schofield, head of Varndean School in Brighton. Andy was thoroughly enthused by the academy model and by the potential of the project. By May 2008 we had the funding agreement in place and it was decided the academy should open in September 2009 in existing buildings and with a new building ready for the following academic year.

The value of boarding

Boarding has been seen from the outset as an integral

element of the academy, which will have a strong house system. The houses will be called by the same names as at Wellington College, where they are named after generals and other prominent figures from Wellington's days – although there is no 'Napoleon' house! Most of the houses at the Wellington Academy will be for day pupils but two will be for boarders. It is planned that there will be 100 boarders at the academy, allowing for 50 boys in one house and 50 girls in the other. The boarders will come not only from service families but from others in the area that might benefit from the distinctive pastoral care that boarding offers. It is also envisaged that there will be spaces for children in care, who we believe will flourish in the atmosphere of the academy.

Boarding offers a very attractive option for parents and for pupils, and it is wrong that it is mainly on offer in the independent sector. State boarding schools such as Wyndham College, Adams' Grammar and Princess Alexander are comparatively rare examples. Boarding comes in two main variants: full boarding, where the children go home only at half terms and at 'exeat', and weekly boarding, where the children are expected to go home every weekend. The academy plans to offer both options. For the child, boarding can be an extremely happy and productive experience.

Children in Britain can spend as much as two hours each day travelling to and from school, which is time consuming and often allows little constructive opportunity for work. It can also be very tiring and stressful. Children at boarding schools have much more time to spend pursuing their artistic, sporting and other interests. They can make the most of the school's facilities, which can otherwise lie idle in the late afternoon and evening, as well as the weekend. They benefit from the company of like-minded children,

and grow in independence and self-assurance. It is an ideal preparation for living away from home, and for learning how to fend for oneself without a parent on hand. Mobile phones and email make communication with home much easier and more frequent than in days of old.

The Harry Potter effect

Boarding is neither Tom Brown's School Days nor is it Hogwarts. Modern house-parenting mean that adults can ensure that civilised standards prevail; bullying is minimised or even banished. Indeed, Harry Potter has probably done more than anybody over the last ten years to make boarding seem an attractive option for children.

The qualities of a good house-parent are not unlike the qualities of a real parent. Patience and a sense of humour are needed, as are strength of character and resolution. House-parents also need to be naturally warm and caring. Many – quite possibly most – teachers possess these qualities, and house-parenting provides them with an excellent career option. I believe that it should be extended very significantly across the state sector, and am confident that high quality house-parents would be found to fill the posts.

At Wellington College, the posts are eagerly sought after, as they are in most independent boarding schools. They are normally filled by internal promotion, and where the posts are advertised in the press, they attract very strong fields. It is thought to be not only a very prestigious, but also a deeply satisfying job. Close bonds are formed with the parents of the children under the care of the house-parent and it takes the school teaching profession into an altogether deeper place. The presence of boarders in a school also changes the quality of that school: it begins to have the qualities of a home, rather than a transitory place of work. The change

is palpable, and is noticed by all in the community. State schools would be different and, I believe, better places if they were to offer some boarding within them.

An unnecessary chasm

The wholly unnecessary chasm between state and independent schools was possibly the most unsatisfactory feature of 20th century education. The new century is witnessing both sectors drawing closer together, with a spirit and willingness to learn from each other's distinctive systems and strengths. The creation of academies by independent schools is an excellent way of bridging the divide between some of the most privileged institutions and children and some of the least privileged. Opportunities for starting academies should be extended down to Prep Schools.

Where an independent school feels unable to start an academy, they should be encouraged to form trusts or federations with state schools. Ideally, every state and every independent school should be federated in some way or another. Starting an academy is not as difficult as some independent schools have made out, and I am puzzled why some have pulled back. The resistance of a local authority could have been an obstacle, and we experienced this at my last school, Brighton College, between 2002 and 2005. Most local authorities have now ended their resistance, as Gordon Brown has proved himself to be in favour of academies, as indeed is David Cameron for the Conservatives. It is hard to conceive that any future Labour leader would go back on the policy, while the Liberal Democrats under Nick Clegg are not opposed to academies either. So the grounds for opposition from local politicians have been much reduced in the last couple of years.

Overcoming obstacles

The principal reasons for independent schools not wanting to found academies are several. But none need be terminal. Starting academies is not a costly option, especially now that the £2 million requirement has been removed by the schools secretary, Ed Balls. At Wellington, we were able to tell our parents that the academy would cost the College little or nothing, and so it has proved. Governor conservatism has proved another obstacle. Here I believe the Charity Commission has helped by making it clear that the founding of an academy will count very significantly towards meeting the criteria of 'public benefit' which independent schools are being required to meet if they are to retain charitable status.

Parental concern is another factor cited by independent schools. I think this is largely a chimera. Most parents with children at independent schools are happy for their children to have opportunities to interact with children from state schools. They will be meeting state school children at university and beyond and see the benefit of such encounters, as long as they do not distract their children from public exams, something which need not happen. At Wellington College, we plan a range of opportunities for the students to take part in joint activities, often on a house basis. There will be joint walks and expeditions, trips and competitions, and opportunities for pupils and teachers to spend short periods of time in each other's schools. Not one of our parents has raised objections to these ideas.

A positive experience for Wellington College

A final concern, which is quite widespread among independent schools, is that senior management will be

distracted, and that the independent school could lose focus because of all the demands of setting up an academy and then overseeing it. It is indeed quite possible to imagine scenarios where the head of an independent school or his senior managers do spend vast amounts of time on academy business. All I can say is that at Wellington College this is not what has happened, and that it need not happen.

Having heard stories of heads being distracted in this way, I was adamant that we should devise a structure that ensured this would not happen. Academy business has taken on average only an hour or two of my time per week over the last two years. What we did initially was to appoint a colleague who had retired from the senior leadership team to oversee the academy. When he left for a sabbatical, we appointed another senior colleague who had previously been a head of science in a comprehensive to take over from him. Their work is quite onerous, and takes some time, although no other employee at Wellington has had to commit significant time to the project. But independent schools need to ensure that they have a governor who is willing to become heavily involved: in our case, the governor who chaired the project steering group has probably spent an average of 20 hours a week on the academy over the last year and a half. His has all been unpaid work, and he will go on to become a key member of the academy governing body.

Every academy is unique, and this chapter has only attempted to set out the experience of one particular institution. The Wellington Academy has also yet to open its doors, and it is possible that there will be significant obstacles and problems. What I can say, writing from the perspective of summer 2008, is that the experience to date has been wholly positive. I would strongly encourage all

independent schools to think about starting an academy, and to offer boarding within it.

Dr Anthony Seldon has been Master of Wellington College since 2006, having previously been Headmaster of Brighton College from September 1997. He is also author or editor of over 25 books on contemporary history, politics and education. His books include 'Churchill's Indian summer' (1984), 'The Thatcher effect' (1989), 'Major, a political life' (1997), 'Conservative century' (1994), 'Blair' (2005) and 'Blair unbound, 2001-2007' (2008). This chapter was written with invaluable assistance from Andy Schofield and Ian Frayne.

Notes

- 1 These are: linguistic, logical, cultural, physical, spiritual, moral, personal and social.

Primary academies

Paul Marshall

Towards a New Settlement for Education

For the first 35 years of the post-war era Britain's steel, railway and automobile industries as well as most utilities were owned and managed by the state. Today, it is accepted that these industries are better off under private sector management, albeit with the appropriate regulatory regimes to protect consumers against monopoly abuse. Instead, Whitehall has other commanding heights with which to busy itself – the new giants are education and health.

Most schools in England and Wales were brought under local authority control by the 'Balfour' Education Act of 1902 and have remained there ever since. There are good reasons why education has been under state monopoly control longer than industry, reflected in the fact that similar 'settlements' are to be found in almost all other developed economies. The primary problem is confusion about the role of markets.

Defenders of the status quo in education tend to caricature any structural reform as privatisation or 'market fundamentalism'. On the other side of the debate, advocates of reform let themselves down by simplistically portraying 'markets' as the solution to the failings of public sector provision, without giving sufficient recognition to the conditions which society expects in the delivery of public services, and which do not apply to the provision of private

goods. In particular, we expect education to be available to all, free at the point of delivery. The price mechanism is unavailable as a means of rationing. And failure – given the importance of the ‘good’ – should be unacceptable.

For this reason, the future of public education requires a more subtle approach than either the champions of unfettered markets or the defenders of the status quo are proposing. Public education cannot become a private market, but there are features of private markets which need to be injected into the DNA of public education. This can be achieved without compromising the key principles that should underpin the delivery of our public services.

Contestability, innovation and best practice

The first of these is contestability,¹ which, applied to public services, calls for a continued flow of new and alternative models to ‘compete’ within a system of guaranteed provision.² Contestability in this model becomes a spur to improvement.

The second feature of private markets which we sorely lack in public services is innovation and experimentation. There is plenty of top-down change in public education, but this is very different from bottom-up experimentation. The latter is much less likely to happen in a system where all schools consider themselves alike, and where there are uniform objectives and uniform control, than in a system brought to life by the contrasting visions of multiple sponsors and providers.

The third is the rapid transmission of best practice. In private markets, companies constantly try to learn from and improve upon their competitors. Compare this to British public education, whose deeply engrained resistance to change is one of its most defining characteristics.

The debate around synthetic phonics is a good case in point. There is overwhelming evidence of the effectiveness of synthetic phonics for teaching literacy, especially for disadvantaged children.³ Despite the best efforts of the government to encourage its wider adoption, however, the implementation of synthetic phonics across the school network still moves at a snail's pace.

Introducing these three features of markets into public education, without endangering the underlying “compact” (that it should be available to all and free at the point of use), has been the great policy challenge of recent years. And the key change – one which will be come to be seen as a seminal historical event – has been the introduction of diversity in the provision and management of schools through the academies programme.

Britain was not the first developed country to embrace diversity in the delivery of public education. That honour goes to Sweden and the United States. Sweden introduced radical reform of their school system in 1991, devolving responsibility for provision from central to local government and introducing a voucher system that would allow independent schools to compete on equal terms with municipal schools for pupils and funds. Today 10 per cent of Swedish high school students go to independent schools, all of which are non-selective and free at the point of use. In the same year, the US charter school movement was launched in Minnesota and today the United States has over 3,500 charter schools operating as independent schools within the public education system.

The role of academies

The first independent providers in our public education system were Margaret Thatcher's City Technology Colleges

(CTCs), introduced in the Education Act of 1988. But as Conor Ryan notes in his chapter, CTCs expected full sponsorship from the private sector and were given substantially more funding than neighbouring schools. In the end, only fifteen CTCs were established. It was left to Andrew Adonis in 2000 to persuade the Blair government to introduce a much more ambitious programme of independent provision, in the form of academies.

The programme has been unnecessarily controversial, particularly through the inclusion of a sponsorship fee and capital building programme – neither of which are present in US charter schools or Sweden’s ‘free’ schools. Similarly, permitting even a modest degree of selection has raised the spectre of grammar school style ‘cream-skimming’ which goes against the driving purpose of the programme: to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children.⁴

Despite these reservations, the evidence suggests that academies are working; the government is on course to meet its original objective of building 200 academies by 2010 and has recently doubled the target to 400.

The big question today is – where next? And the answer lies in primary schools.

The complacency about primary schools

An extraordinary complacency reigns over the performance of England’s primary schools. Google ‘failing schools’ and you will find 23 separate links to secondary schools before there is even a mention of primary schools. Or take the recent government announcement that it was considering the closure of 638 ‘failing schools’ – all are secondaries. Primary schools apparently do not merit the same urgency or attention.

The complacency is engendered in part by the highly misleading national statistics upon which policymakers appear to rely. The most up to date public information on the performance of primary schools in England & Wales is the 2005 report by the National Audit Office (NAO).⁵ According to the NAO, 23 per cent of the 3,343 secondary schools in England and Wales are failing but only 4 per cent of the 17,361 primary schools are. In other words, failure is massively skewed towards secondaries.

There are two major flaws in the statistics. First, the number of poorly performing secondary schools is bolstered by a category – ‘underperforming schools’ – which does not even exist for primary schools. This is the category which measures achievement in relation to the social context of the school, such as the numbers of pupils with special needs or from deprived backgrounds. There are 578 secondary schools in this category. In 2005, the DCSF promised equivalent primary school data by September 2006. We are still waiting.

Second, the criteria for ‘low attaining’ schools (which account for 402 of the 1557 poorly performing schools, according to the NAO) are much more severe for secondary than for primary schools. To be classified as low attaining, secondary schools need only miss the government floor target of 25 per cent of pupils achieving five or more ‘good’ GCSEs for a single year.⁶ Primary schools need to miss their equivalent floor target (65 per cent of pupils achieving level 4 in English and maths) for four years in a row. So under the current definition only 349 primary schools are classified as low attaining. If we were to use the same benchmark for primary as for secondary schools (one year rather than four), the number of low attaining primary schools rises to 1,870 for English and 2,797 for maths.

One might expect the proportion of poorly performing schools to be similar in the primary and secondary sectors. If the proportions were exactly the same, the ratio would be 6:1. But the current ratio, we are told by NAO, is 0.9:1. This is statistical hogwash. We understand that the DCSF have reservations about these statistics. Well they might. But it is their responsibility to publish data which will allow a more reasoned public debate.

The importance of tackling poorly performing primaries is reinforced by a large body of evidence showing that a child's educational prospects are largely determined before they arrive at secondary school. Prior attainment is comfortably the strongest explanatory factor of performance at secondary school, significantly stronger than the link to free school meal eligibility (FSM) or special educational needs (SEN). In fact the correlation of GCSE attainment to prior attainment is almost twice as high as it is to SEN.⁷

There is strong evidence that the effects of social disadvantage are most easily overcome at an early age, yet official statistics suggest that very few primary schools manage to alter the learning trajectory on which their pupils are already set when they arrive. According to a recent comprehensive study of London primary schools, the correlation between school attainment at key stage 2 and the percentage of pupils on free school meals was as high as 78 per cent.⁸ Of course there are laudable exceptions to this; there are primary schools with outstanding head teachers that manage to buck the trend. But the general rule, sadly, is that for most primary schools, the intake determines the outcomes. Deprivation is destiny.

For anybody concerned with improving Britain's rates of social mobility, this is unacceptable. It is time to end the complacency.

Extending academies to primary schools

The academies movement was born out of a belief that children at the worst performing schools (generally those with the most disadvantaged intakes) deserved better. Failing schools were handed over to new management who were given the freedom to innovate and experiment. It is time that primary schools too benefited from this influx of energy, ambition and ideas.

Greater diversity of primary provision would intensify the debate about what works best for disadvantaged children in their early years. We would no doubt see more outreach to parents, more experimentation with numeracy and literacy programmes and a greater quest for solutions to poor behaviour. And school models which were effective would rapidly be copied or rolled out into other communities.

An extension of the academies programme into primary schools could proceed without some of the elements which have made the secondary school programme controversial. In particular, there should be no need to combine the principle of independent school management with a capital programme or sponsorship fee.

Removing these requirements would also open the way for much greater parental involvement in the programme. Primary schools are smaller and much easier to manage than secondary schools. It should be perfectly acceptable – and low risk – for parents to be able to group together to establish their own schools, particularly when their existing school is threatened with closure, as is the case with more than 300 rural schools. This is exactly what happened in Sweden where the most sparsely populated municipalities in the northern county of Norrbotten are among those with the largest share of students in independent schools.⁹

Greater parental involvement in the programme would in turn lift one of the major constraints which is already beginning to hold back the expansion of the academies programme in the secondary sector – capacity. There are only a limited number of providers in the non-profit sector which will be able to take on the full challenge of managing a secondary school (with typically 1,200 pupils and an annual budget of £5 million). This is why the government is already finding ways to make it easier for universities and private schools to become sponsors. Primary schools are much smaller institutions that are easier for committed parents, community groups or co-operatives to run.

Indeed, it is to the primary sector and to committed parents that we should turn to lead the extension of the academies programme, which Julian Astle calls for in his chapter, from the ‘takeover’ model currently favoured by the government to a ‘start up’ model such as operates in Sweden.

Introducing parents, charities and educational specialists as independent providers with freedom to innovate and experiment will allow the primary sector to benefit from a new wind of change. Injecting new vision and new leadership into poorly performing schools will not only turn around those schools but create models of best practice for other schools which face similar challenges. It is time to be more ambitious for our primary schools.

Paul Marshall is co-chairman of Absolute Return for Kids (ARK), the children’s charity and academy chain. He is chairman of Marshall Wace LLP and chairman of the Management Board of CentreForum. Previous education publications include ‘Tackling educational inequality’ (2007) and ‘Aiming higher’ (2006).

Notes

- 1 Contestability theory was first developed in the early 1980s by the American economist Will Baumol, who recognised that monopoly providers only need to be exposed to the 'threat' of competition (as opposed to actual competition) in order to act competitively.
- 2 G Mulgan, 'Democratic dismissal, competition and contestability among the quangos', Oxford Review of Economic Policy, 1994.
- 3 J Rose, 'Independent review of early Reading', DfES, 2006.
- 4 Like specialist schools, academies are allowed to select 10 per cent of pupils by aptitude in the specialism of their school.
- 5 National Audit Office, 'Improving poorly performing schools in England', January 2006.
- 6 In 2008, this has been raised to 30 per cent including English and maths.
- 7 P Marshall, 'Tackling educational inequality', CentreForum, 2007.
- 8 www.fos.dcsf.gov.uk
- 9 F Bergström and M Blank, 'A survey of the development of independent schools in Sweden', 2005.

From academies to ‘free schools’

Julian Astle

“If the government would make up its mind to require for every child a good education, it might save itself the trouble of providing one”

– John Stuart Mill, 1860

The school leaders who have contributed to this collection of essays have already changed the lives of many thousands of young people in some of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the country. In the process, they have also helped to change the terms of the English education debate, not least by demonstrating that a good state funded education need not necessarily be provided by the state.

As a result of their efforts, a political consensus is fast developing about the merits of allowing independent providers (private schools, universities, livery companies, charities, philanthropists, businesses and parents) into the state funded sector. If these social entrepreneurs continue to deliver where the state has failed, many others will certainly follow in their footsteps. It is not inconceivable that, with sufficient political support, the 10 per cent of secondary schools that they will run by 2010 could become 50 per cent or more by the middle of the century. And it is this that marks the academies programme out from the many other departmental initiatives of recent years: that it could change for ever the way in which state funded education is provided in this country.

But how will the programme have to evolve if its transformational potential is to be realised?

The government remains committed to its existing policy of inviting new providers to take over failing schools under a new name and in new, state of the art facilities built at public expense. While ministers may not yet be planning a change of direction, they are planning a change of gear. Having seen 83 academies open in the six years from 2002, the government now plans to open another 230 in the next two years. The vast majority will replace the most persistently underperforming of the 638 secondary schools in which fewer than 30 per cent of pupils are currently achieving five or more good GCSEs.

Those who have studied academy performance will be confident that this will, in the majority of cases, lead to significant improvements at the school level. Across the 83 academies that are now open, GCSE results are rising at over twice the national average, with the result that the proportion of pupils achieving 5 good GCSEs has already increased from 22 to 42 per cent. As Paul Marshall argues in the previous chapter, there is no reason to believe that the same degree of improvement could not be brought to failing primary schools too.

What is less clear is whether this ‘take over’ approach – however much it is accelerated – will ever lead to the realisation of the government’s wider vision, set out in the 2005 White Paper, of a dynamic system in which schools compete for pupils and funds “with weak schools replaced quickly by new ones, coasting schools pushed to improve and opportunities for the best schools to expand and spread their ethos and success throughout the system”.¹

Since academies have almost always replaced existing schools, they have done nothing to increase overall

capacity. More good school places have been created, but the overall number of places available still broadly matches the number of school children in the system. As one recent study has pointed out, this makes the competition to secure a place in a good school roughly analogous to a game of musical chairs in which “there are enough chairs for everyone, but some are more desirable than others”.² The academies programme, to continue the analogy, has so far been used to replace the broken chairs, rather than to add new ones.

Across the system as a whole, very few schools are opening or closing in response to demand (2 per cent of primary schools and 1.5 per cent of secondary schools either entered or left the state system in each of the three years since 2003-04), with the consequence that virtually all schools are able to fill their classrooms, almost regardless of quality.³ And while the best secondary schools are expanding and the worst are contracting, both are doing so at a rate of less than 3 per cent per year. What is more, the inability of the funding system to respond quickly and accurately to changes in school populations means the impact of these changes on school budgets is likely to be felt only after a considerable delay, if at all. Little wonder then that the threat of government intervention looms larger over poorly performing schools than does the risk of a parent exodus. In a largely static system in which the existence of surplus places is actively discouraged, parental choice is extremely limited. As a result, it is primarily upwards to the Secretary of State, rather than downwards to parents, that schools are accountable.

If that is to change – if parents are to be presented with meaningful choices and competition between schools is to reach the ‘biting point’ where it really starts to ratchet

up standards – further liberalisation of the supply side will almost certainly be needed. Under current policy, only those schools in which fewer than 30 per cent of pupils are achieving five good GCSEs really need worry. But all those secondary schools that are neither very good (as around one in every five schools is) nor very bad (also about 20 per cent) are essentially left to coast. The government is unlikely to intervene and pupils are unlikely to leave.

It is for this reason that many are now calling for a change of direction for the academies programme, away from the ‘take over’ model favoured by the government, towards a ‘start up’ model like that in operation in Sweden. There, new independent providers are invited to establish new schools (known as ‘free schools’) at the time and in the place of their choosing. They are entering the system not to replace, but to compete with, existing schools. And the result of that competition – so economic theory predicts and Swedish experience appears to confirm – is to increase the standard of education that all children receive, whether they attend the new school or the old school down the road.⁴

It is important to be clear, however, that a move in this direction would imply a new and very different purpose for the academies programme. Rather than being a mechanism for addressing localised instances of failure in an essentially ‘closed’ system, the programme would instead become a tool for prising that system open – to new people, new money and new ideas.

What then should be the requirements placed on this new generation of academies or ‘free schools’ as we might more usefully conceive them?

Arguably, there should be only five: first, that they agree to teach the core national curriculum, ideally much

slimmed down; second, that they submit themselves to Ofsted inspection; third, that they abide by the statutory admissions code; fourth, that they do not charge fees to parents; and fifth, that they meet their own capital costs. Of these, only the last represents a major departure from current practice.

So far government has always met the full cost of building academies, often in expensive, state of the art facilities. The average capital cost of the first 83 academies has been £25 million.⁵ This money now comes from the Building Schools for the Future fund (BSF) established for the wider purpose of building or refurbishing maintained schools across the country. Ministers have put aside £9.3 billion for this task over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11.

The Conservatives have other plans for these funds.⁶ So as to increase the number of secondary school places by 220,000 over the next nine years, they are proposing to redirect 15 per cent of the BSF budget (£1.4 billion in the next three years and a projected £4.5 billion in the next nine years) to meet the capital costs of establishing 'new academies' (the name they have given to new state funded independent schools that would likely not otherwise have been built due to the surplus places rules).⁷ The government points out that every penny that is used to create these surplus places will be taken away from other maintained schools, to the detriment of their pupils.

For this reason, the Liberal Democrats have proposed an alternative model in which private providers would be required to meet their own capital costs, but then be allowed to recoup them through the recurrent funding they receive from the state. This is essentially a diluted version of the Swedish model, which also requires private providers to put up their own capital funding, but which

allows them to make a profit as part of the deal. More than half of Sweden's free schools are run on a profit-making basis, many are heavily oversubscribed and their numbers continue to grow. As a result, the Swedes are reaping the benefits of increased supply, but at a much reduced cost to the taxpayer.

None of the three main parties in the UK is currently prepared to countenance the idea of schools making a profit out of state funded education. It is unclear whether their squeamishness is justified, however. When asked whether he regretted the decision to allow for-profit firms into the Swedish school system, Mikael Sandström, an education analyst and advisor to the Swedish Prime Minister, was unequivocal: "If I am disappointed with any of the non-state providers it is the not-for-profits who, with no commercial incentive to expand, have been less effective at identifying untapped parental demand and slower to set up new schools."⁸ The lesson, according to Sandström, is clear: philanthropy alone might not be able to power the expansion in academy numbers that politicians would like to see.

Creating incentives to enter the system is only part of the challenge. Policymakers need also to dismantle the barriers that new providers face when trying to set up a school. The government has begun to do this by exempting universities and private schools from the requirement that all sponsors donate £2 million towards a long term endowment for the future educational needs of the school. But more needs to be done.

It is still far too easy for local authorities to prevent new schools being established. The government took a big step in the right direction when it decided that competitions should take place for new schools with parent groups encouraged to participate. Yet only a handful of competitions have been

held, and only one parent run school established, under the provisions of the 2006 Education Act.

If this is to change, local authorities will, in all cases, have to become commissioners rather than providers. This was what the 2005 White Paper originally advocated, before the decision was taken to allow local authorities to bid for new schools. The result is that they are still caught between two very different roles and the profound attitudinal shift required to become real 'parent champions' has not yet been achieved. Too often, new providers are resisted, rather than assisted, just as parental demand is still viewed as something to 'manage' rather than meet.

In future, any provider who agrees to abide by the five preconditions for entry should automatically qualify for state funding on an equal footing with all other maintained schools. The market, rather than the local authority plan, should determine the number of surplus places thereafter. And because most funds are linked to pupil numbers, rather than school numbers, the costs of any periods of 'over supply' should be manageable. Should ministers wish to reduce these costs further, they could do so by further increasing the proportion of total funding that 'follows the pupil' (perhaps by reducing the minimum funding guarantee). If they want to avoid these costs altogether, they could link school budgets entirely to student numbers by adopting a Swedish style voucher scheme.

Local authorities, meanwhile, should have their 'school support' role widened. After all, it simply will not be possible for ministers in London to play midwife and health visitor to each and every free school, as they have had to do for academies. The DCSF cannot be allowed to become some kind of giant education authority with a direct relationship with hundreds or even thousands of schools.

In some cases, many of the traditional support functions of a local education authority will pass to free school federations or chains like the Harris Federation or ARK. This has certainly been the trend in Sweden, where providers like Kunskapsskolan (which runs close to 30 free schools) provide their schools with many of the specialist services offered by local authorities in England. But not all free schools will be members of a federation. Many – particularly parent and community run schools – will always need the active support of government, ideally at the local rather than central level.

Local authorities should also be encouraged to play a bigger role in policing school standards between Ofsted's infrequent visits. They already perform this function – through School Improvement Partners (SIPs) – in most maintained schools. They should be empowered to do the same (under the oversight of the Schools Commissioner) for free schools.

The most important task for local authorities, however, will be to offer direct assistance to parents – and poor parents in particular. It is often assumed that it is only the well educated and the well heeled that will benefit from increased choice. In fact, it is those who are stuck on the wrong side of our socially segregated schools system that stand to gain the most. But for that to happen, local authorities will need actively to advise parents of their options and their rights; to disseminate clear, objective information about local schools; and provide free transport for poorer school children. If they can achieve this – so the poorest children can escape the poorest schools in which they are currently trapped – the daily experiences and future prospects of millions of young people will be changed for the better.

Julian Astle joined CentreForum as Director in 2005 after working as an advisor on post conflict reconstruction within the British government, the United Nations Mission in Kosovo and the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia Herzegovina. He previously worked as political advisor to Paddy Ashdown MP in the House of Commons. He is the author of several education publications, including 'Open universities: a funding strategy for higher education' (2006), 'The surest route: early years education and life chances' (2007) and 'A liberal education policy' (2007).

Notes

- 1 Department for Education and Skills, 'More choice, higher standards for all', 2005.
- 2 S Burgess et al, 'School choice in England: background facts', Centre for Market and Public Organisation, 2006.
- 3 L Sibieta et al, 'Level playing field? The implications of school funding', CfBT Education Trust, 2008.
- 4 M Sandström and F Bergstrom, 'School vouchers in practice: competition will not hurt you', Journal of Public Economics vol. 89, 2005.
- 5 Response to Parliamentary Question 150837, Hansard, 2007.
- 6 The Conservative Party, 'Raising the bar, closing the gap', 2007.
- 7 The Audit Commission has suggested that local authorities should allow no more than 10 per cent of surplus places in aggregate and no more than 25 per cent in individual schools.
- 8 In conversation with the author, Stockholm, May 2008.

ACADEMIES

and the future of state education

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