

National Association for Primary Education

Academisation

NAPE recognises that a key characteristic of the UK educational system is its diversity and that a number of schools have chosen to go down the academisation route for positive reasons bound up with the relative freedom this affords for shaping school identity and philosophy. However, the association is strongly resistant to the imposition of academy status and views with extreme concern the current government's commitment to a system which dismantles the role of local authorities and espouses academy status for all publicly funded schools in the long term (Education White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere*, March 2016). There may have been a retreat from the White Paper's proposal for forced academisation by 2022 (May 2016), but its policies are still designed to expand the academy sector, irrespective of parental and professional perspectives. This academisation by stealth should be opposed for a number of reasons:

1. There is no clear cut evidence in relation to pupil performance of academisation of itself generating benefits for children. What is striking is the level of variance of performance within both MAT and LA groupings of schools, a conclusion which has been highlighted in the recently published Education Policy Institute survey (July, 2016). Indeed its overall recommendation is that:

The Government should not pursue full academisation as a policy objective, instead the objective should be for pupils to be in a good school, regardless of whether that is a high performing MAT or LA.

One notes with interest that the Chief Inspector (2016) has reported on the relative success of primary schools in England compared with secondary schools, as judged by OfSTED inspections, and yet only a fifth of them have moved over to academy status – hardly a ringing endorsement for academisation!

2. We are committed to the principle of schools enjoying an open and supportive relationship with the communities they serve and we see this principle being under threat in multi-academy trusts where governance potentially can be restricted to a slimmed down executive with no parental nor local representation and where accountability can be perceived in commercial terms and not in relation to local democracy. The appointment of Regional School Commissioners in 2014 may in theory give the impression of local interests being met, but the fact that they are centrally appointed civil servants line managed by the Secretary of State for Education means in practice that there are no local structures for accountability.

Academisation may have the laudable intention to free schools of red-tape, enabling schools to become more autonomous in the way in which they spend their budget and develop policies, but the reality would appear to be very different: accountability to local authority mechanisms is replaced by accountability to a potentially highly interventionist and unelected body of trustees alongside an unelected Regional Commissioner. Hardly a recipe for local democracy?

3. We view with disquiet the extent of salary inflation in the headships of multi-academy trusts: more than half of the largest multi-academy trusts are paying their chief executives more than the prime-minister (£143,000) according to a report in *The Observer* (24 July 2016). Moreover over £1 million pounds has been spent on executive expenses since 2012. This is difficult to justify, given the fact that this is coming out of the public purse at a time when schools are becoming increasingly strapped for cash. Such evidence of apparent misuse of public funds (alongside some well publicised cases of fraud) highlights the lack of accountability in the academy sector. For example, in 2014 the House of Commons Education Select Committee reported on the links between some academies and companies in which their sponsors had an interest.

4. We are mindful of the risks attached to academies, outside LA control, becoming highly selective in their admission policies to the detriment of pupils with special needs, a risk well articulated in Warwick Mansell's CPRT blog (15 July 2016).

5. There is substantial evidence over time that within the LA set-up maintained schools can flourish, benefiting from the support services available, the expertise on offer both within the local region of schools and within the education department in the LA. Delegated budgets have in practice given schools enormous flexibility in relation to the allocation of resources and their prioritisation. Moreover, many LAs, but by no means all, have done a formidable job in moving schools forward, partly through harnessing expertise across schools as well as within.

6. The benefits of collaboration between schools is seen by the White Paper as a laudable by-product of academisation, but this can be achieved within the maintained sector as well and indeed many schools are generating collaborative links both within LA boundaries and beyond which are contributing significantly to staff development.

7. The status of the National Curriculum is highly problematic in relation to academies, which in theory can establish their own curricula. *The National Curriculum will no longer be a decree, but a benchmark.*(6.8), claims the White Paper. But if the national curriculum is perceived as an entitlement for pupils, how can one justify exemption for an expanding cohort of pupils in the academy sector?

Overview

The government should radically review its policies regarding academisation, adopting a stance which is guided by evidence rather than rhetoric and which translates into reality its commitment to democratic values at the level of local accountability. Much more research is needed regarding the long-term benefits of organisational structures in the system both in terms of academic outputs and pastoral wellbeing. So far the focus has largely been on performance data in selective core curriculum areas to the exclusion of the wider curriculum and the emotional/social dimensions of schooling. As argued in the CPRT Research Survey 9 (2016):

The needs of the child should be at the centre of policymaking.....Major structural changes should take place only when their benefit for those being educated can be conclusively demonstrated.

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