

Academy Schools were originally a Victorian invention, set up by religious dissenters for their own children. Other 19th century school models are also available – Ragged Schools, for example, or Dame Schools. According to the DfE website, the latter “were often run by old ladies or retired soldiers who for small fees taught the basic ‘three Rs’ to the children of poorer tradesmen.” Of course, the government has already suggested ex-forces personnel be fast-tracked into teaching (improve behaviour, don’t y’know) whilst, under the proposed new pension arrangements, lots of children will be taught by old ladies, or at least 68-year-old ones. The recently announced pay cap neatly takes care of the “small fees” element. There is nothing new under the sun and I expect it won’t be long before we can welcome other Victorian revivals, such as rickets and child

chimney sweeps.

The drive to convert schools to academies, originally a Labour policy, is the flagship of the current coalition’s education thinking. The theory is that, freed from Local Authority bureaucracy, schools will have greater autonomy to tailor

learning to their particular context and drive up standards. There will be true competition: better schools will expand, less successful ones will close. Competition will not simply be between schools, but also between the “mediating layer” – i.e. the academy sponsors and LAs, the latter being forced to raise their game or drop out of it.

In my own LA, schools considering conversion have been attending meetings in which an existing academy outlines the advantages and potential pitfalls, whilst the LA details what it offers and what it will continue to offer to schools who convert. Ultimately, LAs will

still have to work with academies, selling them services in the market place and intervening if and when academy standards fall. These meetings, conducted in a spirit of inquiry, have led to a few conversions but most have decided to stay within LA control. The rush to convert is not yet happening in the primary sector, though the trickle has become a small stream that may yet become a swollen river. Schools and governors seem, anecdotally, less anti than 12 months ago, but there have been worrying newspaper reports of academies being saddled with huge bills for support staff

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KEVIN HARCOMBE | HEADTEACHER, REDLANDS PRIMARY

ROLL OF THE DICE

The change from Local Authority maintained to academy school is essentially still a gamble, says Kevin Harcombe. Only time will tell how many primaries are on to a winner...



pensions and criticism that academies employ too many leaders at inflated salaries rather than concentrating on the bread and butter of better teaching.

Schools considering conversion have conducted SWOT analyses (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats). For example:

Strengths

- better control of the strategic agenda
- counteract poor funding from the LA
- not be left behind
- able to address staffing issues more quickly

Weaknesses

- seven year sign up (too long)
- time commitment from SLT
- complexity of financial reporting and consequent need to appoint specialist staff
- loss of LA support

Opportunities

- more responsive to change
- secure better / cheaper services
- change structure of governing body
- sell services to smaller schools

Threats

- loss of focus on standards through focus on the change process
- backlash from parents
- loss of networking opportunities
- staff concerned about pensions, pay and loss of national pay bargaining

Because a school signs up to academy status for seven years, governors have to consider whether effectively they want to

be directors and whether the governing body in place seven years hence will have the necessary business skills. A business manager would be essential, which is another salary to pay from any conversion premium.

What are the motives for conversion amongst schools who have embraced it? Bigger budget? Freedom from the LA? Or, as my mum suggested, "because Academy sounds posher"? Peter Pretlove, widely respected head of Bransgore CE Primary in Christchurch which converted this term, is a former LA advisor and has been head of several successful schools, so it is fair to say he knows a thing or two. The move to convert was not, for him, about bigger budgets, nor a vote of no confidence in the LA. "I was concerned that some LA services, including payroll, admissions and grounds maintenance were no longer providing the level of service my school expected, but the main reason the school community opted to convert was to give Bransgore a secure base on which to grow, even after I leave." Totally opposed to forced academies, Peter believes the decision to convert should always be a positive and considered one. "The DfE," he told me, "has been excellent – efficient and supportive. We now have to think like a business – we don't need the LA to change light bulbs for us, nor do we need them to help us improve writing. We have developed our own experts, and links with other schools mean we share our expertise and benefit from that of others." For Peter Pretlove, and for the

parents and children, what really sold the idea was the ability to preserve Bransgore's unique and successful character which they have developed over the years, to some extent in spite of LA control. He is now looking forward to greater freedom further to develop and protect the school's distinctive curriculum as well as being freed from some of the excesses of LA bureaucracy.

Cutting the red tape

Alleged LA bureaucracy looms large in this debate. Some time ago, my own school received a planned visit from the LA Health and Safety police for which I had not prepared, foolishly concerning myself more with teaching and learning. At the end of a demoralising three hours I was almost gleefully informed that my school had scored the lowest ever on their audit. Less than a year later, the school received one of the highest ever scores on the same audit. The thing is, the school was no safer (or only marginally so) because it had never been as bad as the audit made out in the first place. On both occasions the auditor never even left my office, auditing only paper, not reality. The difference was that for the second (successful) one, my staff and governors had spent hours amassing literally thousands of sheets of paper which we gathered in a nice file and politely presented to the auditor who duly ticked her 200 or so boxes, smiled and left us alone. Did you know Pritt Sticks were potentially hazardous and needed to be risk assessed? By then we did, and, more importantly, bloody well had a piece of paper to prove it. The LA was complicit in this complete farce and lots of heads, who had a similar experience to mine, have yet to forgive them for it. Who is to say, however, that the DfE or academy sponsors will be any better? If an academy is sued for a serious health and safety breach, they will have no LA to fight their corner or pick up the tab.

Compulsory conversions

Whilst I and colleague heads

wait and see what happens, spare a thought for those with no choice over conversion – the so-called forced academies, chiefly schools in deprived areas which have performed poorly for a number of years. These schools will be taken over by an external sponsor who will pocket between 1.5 and 6% of a school's budget for their trouble. The sponsors effectively line manage heads – "Here are your priorities for the next fortnight and we'll be back in two weeks to ensure you have achieved them." If not, the head can be sacked and the governing body replaced, though this presupposes a supply of able and willing heads and governors willing to take on another failing school. Schools which choose to convert and fail to maintain acceptable performance can also be forced to have a private sponsor. In sponsored academies, existing headteachers do not normally last more than 18 months in post. Sponsors can and do buy in advisory support from LAs, though there is uncertainty surrounding their ability to provide this as advisory posts have been shed under austerity. In any case, the real expertise lies in schools with the classroom practitioners, only rarely with the advisors who are too often de-skilled in classroom practice. It is likely that school to school support will be the future model for school improvement.

Local Authorities, too, can insist on sponsorship when the head of a failing school does not "play ball", though, circumscribed as they are by safeguarding of employee's rights, it can take considerably longer for them to achieve. It is not unusual in LAs for capability issues to take two years or more to resolve. It is expected that academies will have faster resolution of such issues: not quite, "Get your cards, you're fired," but certainly something less drawn out than that which prevails at the moment. Of course, this also raises the issue of protection of staff rights, pay and conditions under an academy model.

Two things are reasonably

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The total number of academies open in England as of 1st December 2011

clear. Firstly, don't do it for the money. Whilst there are clear financial gains for large secondaries, most primary schools would not be significantly better off by the time all services had been paid for. What's more, if you like your current job, why do it at all? Schools have had considerable curriculum freedom since the Dearing review of the National Curriculum in the 1990s, they just haven't realised it. What is more, schools can and do create as much bureaucracy as LAs.

Secondly, the success or otherwise of Academies will not be clear for years. It is something of a leap in the dark. As one soon-to-be-converted head said to me about his new role, "I'm shitting myself – but it'll be alright." Watch this space.

THE ACADEMIES DEBATE

OPPORTUNITIES AND APPREHENSION

Dan Moynihan, Chief Executive Harris Federation: Academy freedoms for outstanding schools will remove bureaucratic shackles from headteachers and give them the scope and incentive to run their schools even more entrepreneurially for the benefit of children and their communities.

Peter Downes, Liberal Democrat councillor in Cambridgeshire:

The whole academies policy has been carried out without any serious assessment of the financial implications. It risks creating extra costs for the education system, at a time when we can ill afford it.

Chris Keates, general secretary of the NASUWT:

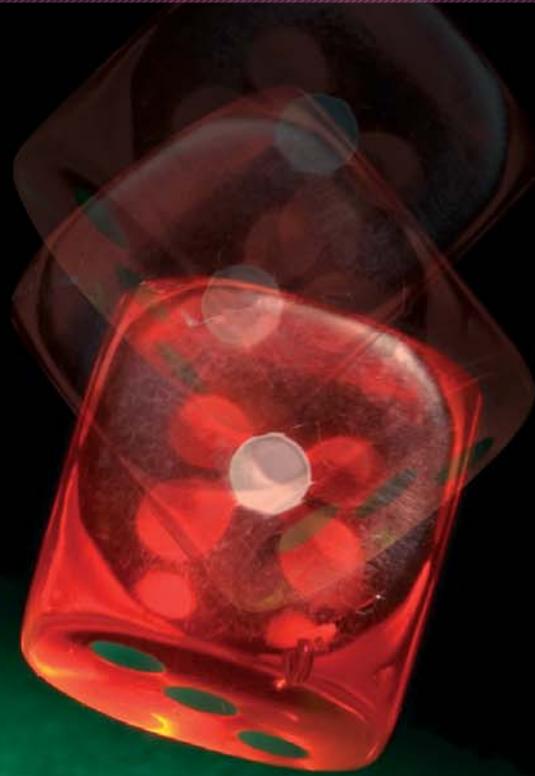
When schools become academies, there is a massive boost to the senior leadership team, which adds layers of bureaucracy not focused on teaching and learning. Schools are being stuffed with people who are simply busy monitoring other people.

Sir Bruce Liddington, director-general of academy sponsor E-Act, speaking about staff salaries:

I know, as chief executive, that I have to be creative about getting good people here, and you have to look at the market and decide what you have to pay. It's not up to me to decide what I'm paid. It's a matter for the board who invited me to show an interest in the job.

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