

Academies, Religion and Private Philanthropy

Peter Vlachos

What are Academies?

According to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), Academies are a new type of school by which the government aims to enhance school leadership through drawing on the skills of sponsors and other supporters. The government claims that this will allow principals and staff new opportunities to develop educational strategies to raise standards and contribute to diversity in areas of disadvantage.

Sponsors provide approximately 10 per cent of capital costs while DfES provides around 90 per cent. Running costs are met in full by the DfES. Despite their relatively small financial commitment, Sponsors are given sweeping powers in the running of the school.

There are currently 27 Academies open. The first three opened in September 2002 and nine in September 2003. Five Academies opened in September 2004 and a further ten in September 2005. A further 49 are in development.

Despite initial support from parents, more recently groups of them have launched legal challenges to the City Academies Programme. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) has opposed the establishment of City Academies as having an undesirable impact on the coherent provision of a comprehensive education service within local education authorities. The NUT also opposes the transfer of publicly provided education assets to the independent sector. They believe that the initiative has the potential to threaten teachers' job security, salaries and conditions of service as well as the role and responsibilities of governing bodies.

Why is the government so keen on them?

The government champions Academies because it believes they will enhance school leadership via the managerial and leadership skills brought in by sponsors. The programme links together various threads of the current government's agenda: the increasing use of faith groups in the delivery of public services, the more direct involvement of private business in the public sector, 'regeneration', the ASBO agenda and the disempowerment of local government.

The Academies programme represents an admission of self-defeat by the government in its inability to provide an effective education system which can produce well-educated, tolerant citizens.

Rather than working towards improving the state education system, the government has decided to abdicate its responsibilities for managing schools, while, rather strangely, continuing to accept the financial burden. The worst of both worlds, in other words.

Who are the Academy sponsors?

In the Home Office report "Working Together: Co-operation between Government and Faith Communities" (February 2004), David Blunkett spoke of "the growing record of partnership between public agencies and faith communities in the delivery of service".

Coupled with New Labour's push for privatisation either through direct sell-offs or by encouraging so-called social entrepreneurship, it is of no surprise therefore that the government welcomes sponsors from business, faith and voluntary groups. Sponsors (who commit £2 million of the £25 million typically needed to build an Academy school and who do not contribute at all to the running costs of the school), include business leaders, religious organisations, corporate companies and even football clubs. Each brings their own agenda and interests, whether that be religious indoctrination or emphasis of particular subjects, in particular business subjects.

The confluence of interests is alarming. The

sponsorship of three Academy schools by the strongly religious business entrepreneur Peter Vardy has raised concerns. His foundation, the Emmanuel Schools Foundation, sponsors Emmanuel College in Gateshead, The King's Academy in Middlesbrough, and Trinity Academy in Doncaster. He is also involved in EC Educational Services, which builds the schools.

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) has noted that creating Academies involves the transfer of publicly funded assets to the control of an unaccountable sponsoring body, set up as a company limited by guarantee. Sponsors receive the entire school budget directly from the Government. Sponsors have responsibility for all aspects of the Academy, including staff appointments, pupil admissions, curriculum and governance arrangements. For a promised £2m stake, sponsors receive enormous benefits, for example school buildings and grounds, Academy supply contracts, advertising, and the development of the kind of workers they wish.

History of Philanthropy and Relationship to Public Services

It's easy to forget that the Welfare State is a relatively recent invention. The Education Act 1870 marked the formal beginnings in England of compulsory state-financed education. (Universal education in Scotland has a much longer history.) Before 1870, education was largely a private affair, with wealthy parents sending their children to fee-paying schools, and others using whatever local teaching was made available.

For health care, throughout the 19th century, philanthropists and social reformers working alone had tried to provide free medical care for the poor. In 1828 William Marsden, a young surgeon who opened a dispensary for advice and medicines, conceived of a hospital to which the only passport should be poverty and disease; where treatment was provided free of charge to any destitute or sick person who asked for it. By 1844 the demand for Marsden's free services was overwhelming and led to the creation of the Royal Free Hospital. As well as the charitable and voluntary hospitals, which tended to deal mainly with serious illnesses, the local authorities of large towns provided municipal hospitals: maternity hospitals, hospitals for infectious diseases like smallpox and tuberculosis, as well as hospitals for the elderly, mentally ill and mentally handicapped.

The history of publicly funded, universal education and health care is relatively short and therefore more fragile than we might want to imagine. Perhaps we, the second, third and fourth generation beneficiaries, take for granted the extent of the transformation which post-WWII New Deal policies had. The old system of philanthropy – and it still exists to a large extent in places like the USA – rests on the assumption that a gulf between rich and poor is inevitable and that, at best, society needs to rely on the goodwill of the rich to provide for the provision of basic social needs.

The reappearance of private sponsorship, therefore, is a huge step backwards for a modern state like Britain.

And yet the government sees an ever-expanding role for private philanthropy. Earlier this year, the Home Office awarded key, strategic multi-year funding to Philanthropy UK, a consortium of organisations geared towards building the relationship between government, donors and their professional advisers. Decisions on funding social welfare projects will increasingly be taken behind closed doors, with less and less public dialogue and public scrutiny.

This approach is a step further towards the 'Americanisation' of our state institutions. But why should we follow the US model and not the

Scandinavian, Canadian or French models of education? The latter provide excellent standards of education in largely secular surroundings and produce by-and-large well-adjusted, tolerant citizens.

Academies: The mid-term report card. A failure in the making?

In its third, government-commissioned annual review of Academies published earlier this year, PricewaterhouseCoopers presented a mixed picture. Although the overall trends in pupil performance in Academies are positive, it is not universally the case that improvements are being made, and some Academies have been performing less well than the national average and other similar schools. The problems which these Academies faced were typical ones of any school: disruption due to delays in moving into the new schools; inadequate lead-in time the principal and staff, changes in senior staff, problems with project managing the building, concern whether school buildings are fit for purpose.

PWC found evidence to suggest that managing pupil behaviour remains a challenge. Even Academy schools are finding it difficult to link good behaviour to achievement and aspirations.

A report published in April this year by New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) – an independent, non-profit-making organisation which advises donors on how to give more effectively to charities – is even more critical.

NPC has suggested that while private money can transform the opportunities for children in state education, funding academies may not be the best option:

"There simply isn't enough evidence to make a conclusive assessment on whether academies are a good investment for donors. Academies show mixed results for their pupils. But there is enough evidence to raise doubts about their cost effectiveness."

NPC says the £25m price tag on a new academy – of which £2m is paid by the sponsor – is very expensive, particularly given the lack of a strong relationship between school performance and investment in buildings. According to DfES figures, it is also significantly more than the cost of building a conventional state school, which is typically £16m to £17m. "Perhaps the most powerful criticism of academies is the £8m difference between the cost of building an academy and the cost of building a conventional school," the report says.

Meanwhile, opposition to Academies continues to grow and problems continue. Last year at least one Academy school was failed by OFSTED and put into "special measures". A private education company pulled out of a £4m scheme to sponsor two City Academies, following a parents' revolt at a nearby independent school it owns (BBC, 14 June 2005). Members of Parliament have been vocal in their concerns over the lack of a coherent strategy in rolling out Academies and their escalating costs. School governors have said that the City Academies programme should be suspended amid "unsavoury information" about funding. The call, by the National Governors' Association, came after allegations that Academy sponsors could receive honours in exchange for donations.

Conclusions

While the government continues with full force to develop Academies the debilitating long-term impact on our education system, if left to continue, will take years if not decades to undo.

What we are now seeing is a return to pre-welfare

state economics. An attempt by government to disengage itself from the delivery of key social services like education. First PFI, now Academies – decentralisation and privatisation by yet another name.

Academies are proving to be a very expensive way of bringing in ‘management expertise’, even then the results have been mixed at best. If a lack of managerial freedom and leadership qualities are the missing ingredients, why does the government not invest in revitalising existing schools rather than pumping upwards of £5 billion into new projects?

The government makes no secret that they welcome religious organisations as sponsors despite the problems caused by religiously-segregated schools. Is this a back-door way of funding the expansion of further religious, albeit non-Christian, schools?

The emphasis on business skills is a further nail in the coffin of liberal arts education. It is bad enough that universities are being dumbed-down to provide more and more vocational training, now the idea is pushing its way down into the younger levels of students. If it doesn’t help an ASBO-laden teenager to land a career in retail, it can’t possibly be worth teaching.

What can we do about it?

The National Secular Society campaigns tirelessly for the end of religious privilege. A cornerstone of the NSS’s platform is the secularisation of schools and the disestablishment of the Church of England. These two aims are crucial if we are to transform the current divisive situation.

Academy schools will lead to more, not fewer, religious schools, and will correspondingly increase the fragmentary divisions between young people and whole societies.

Responding to the speech launching the Commission

on Integration and Cohesion by Ruth Kelly (24th August 2006), Terry Sanderson, vice-president of the National Secular Society, commented that:

“The refusal by the Government to allow its new commission to even consider that faith schools are part of the problem with integration is sheer madness. It seems clear to almost everyone except the vested religious interests that separating children on the basis of their parents’ religion is divisive in the extreme. Instead of breaking down barriers, as the Government says it wants, the continued expansion of single faith schools will exacerbate the problem.”

We need more integration of students, not less. We need more support for state schools, not to wash our hands of the problems and invite private companies to run the show.

Peter Vlachos is Manager of Conway Hall, London; Council Member, National Secular Society; and Visiting Lecturer, Department of Arts Policy and Management, City University London.