

Education Worker

Bulletin of the Education Workers Network - 2012 - issue 8

Academies: FAQ

What are Academies?
They are state sector schools run independent of local authority control and with a private sponsor. The programme began in 2000 under New Labour to deal with so-called 'failing schools'. With the Academies Act 2010 academies dramatically multiplied to over 1600 in 2012. Some schools deemed 'outstanding' by Ofsted have been 'fast-tracked' and many 'outstanding' schools might even be able to opt straight out of local authority control without a sponsor.

What do sponsors get?
Private sponsors put up an initial capital sum of up to £2m and the state foots the bill for around another 90%. The sponsor has a majority on the board of governors, dictates the ethos of the school and controls uses of the school building. Often it controls aspects of the curriculum, the courses available and the kinds of outside agencies that come into schools.

What sort of sponsors are out there? Sponsors do not need a proven track record in education. Academies have been opened by Christian groups like United Learning Trust and Oasis Trust, Christian 'philanthropists' and multi-national banks like United Bank of Switzerland, recent

headline-grabbers for being the employers of the third biggest 'rogue-trader' in financial history.

What do they mean for workers? The current government has already implied they will turn down applications from schools that intend to stick to national agreements or recognise unions. So academies open up the possibility of further eroding conditions for all education workers. They can increase staff workload through ignoring national assessment practices and having extended school days.

What are 'Free' Schools?
These are also independent schools in the state sector, planned to be set up by local parents, teachers and voluntary groups but in practice they may require a private sponsor. They are also free to set their own pay and conditions for workers. Of the 63 Free Schools already approved or planned for 2012-13, 23 are from existing schools, two are existing independent schools and 12 are being set up by faith groups, with many more being opened by charities that already run large 'chains' of academies: ARK, E-E-ACT and the Harris Federation.

Do academies improve education? Recent DfE data show

that academies underperform non-academy schools on the government's own measures, namely the five A*-C grade figure, even when socio-economic figures are considered. The 2007 National Union of Teachers' report *Academies: beyond the spin* found that many academies have high rates of staff turnover, sickness and pupil exclusion (to move on 'problem' pupils). Academies have been said to 'massage' the figures by which schools are judged by entering pupils for courses such as BTECs, whose educational value is doubted by Ofqual, the independent educational standards monitor.

What is the social impact of academies? Academies are free to select 10% of pupils by aptitude and have skewed the educational demographics of areas in which they operate. Some can implement questionable ideological programmes. The Emmanuel Schools Foundation is openly teaching that the Earth is 6000 years old in its science lessons and, in 2006, Channel 4's *Dispatches* found that teachers were immersed in a culture of 'bible-bashing'. Other academies run by businesses and banks have an overt focus on 'business-speak', with many eschewing traditional subjects for business-related study.

by workers - for workers

Fighting academies

Downhills Primary School, in Tottenham, North London, is fighting a strong community campaign against attempts to turn it into a sponsored academy. In January 2012, more than a thousand people marched through Tottenham in support of the four Haringey primaries which are under threat of being handed over to academy sponsors.

Parents, carers, teachers and governors at Downhills think that Ofsted's judgement that the school is 'inadequate' is extremely harsh, though they recognise that this inspection, rushed through on the request of education minister Michael Gove, was highly political. Unlike other local authorities which took steps to protect their schools from the bullying tactics of the DfE, Haringey used schools as bargaining chips: two were given to the DfE in exchange for the DfE not reducing a certain grant. Other Haringey schools were given over within a few weeks of Ofsted visiting. Gove has dubbed these ordinary mums, dads and carers 'enemies of promise' who are 'happy with failure'. Local parents argue that they oppose forced academy status because of the poor track record of academy chains and wish for their children to attend a decent, inclusive, local community school.

Harris, one of the chains expected to take over schools in Haringey, has little experience at overseeing primaries
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and very unimpressive rates of improvement in secondary schools. It has a very high level of informal exclusions (or 'managing out' children, particularly those with special educational needs) and has difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers given the working conditions. Harris academies also use excessive amounts of 'vocational equivalents' alongside their GCSE students. When these are removed, their results drop dramatically to reveal very poor performance overall. The push for academies is not about improving schools; it is about a stealthy privatisation and giving management free rein over the people who work and study in them.

See Save Downhills Campaign: Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/276114265773841/>; Watch the children's "Save Our School" song: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJgqGZydwOY>

Bournville School, Birmingham, became an inspiring example in the fight against academies as governors' plans to convert the school into an academy were defeated through a forceful parent campaign and the threat of united strike action by unions. The governors shelved plans for at least a year, which means the fight is not yet over. But this was a huge victory and an example to all other schools fighting academy conversion. The Hands Off Bournville School campaign says 'Our work is

not over yet, we still need to ensure that the current application for Academy conversion is withdrawn and that the DfE's Academy Order for Bournville School will no longer apply'. The fact is, had workers and parents not fought the conversion, they would be an academy as we speak. Victory to Bournville School!

Oasis Community Learning, a Christian educational trust currently running 14 academies in England, is typical of the theological style of industrial relations promoted by the cheerleaders of the academy sector. Back in November 2011, 13 teachers at its MediaCity Academy (Salford) were sacked as a cost-cutting exercise, sparking five days of strikes as well as a walk out by year 10 and 11 pupils in the run up to Christmas. Ultimately, the campaign to defend the teachers did not win. Local opinion strongly suspects the sackings were retaliations against those teachers who had not agreed to teach Christian beliefs. Indeed, one maths teacher sacked, the only one to be graded 'outstanding' last year, was a practicing Muslim and in January the academy advertised a number of teaching posts, including one in maths. So much for cost-cutting then, especially when precious funds are now been diverted into PR for the new £25 million Oasis Academy MediaCityUK building due to open in September.

Academies workplace issues

Two workers with current and past experience in academies describe the tough work conditions in these schools.

In Jan 2011 my school, rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted, became an academy with limited consultation with the unions. We were sold the lie that we were now free of the thrall of the Local Education Authority, HMI inspections and free from Ofsted inspections for at least five years. This has not been the case. In fact, being taken from LEA control now subjects us to far more stringent work practices, where union guidelines at the very least are bent to suit the requirements of management. It also means that no financial help will be available if the school hits any financial difficulties, which will make teaching staff suffer.

Regarding inspections we are subject to book marking scrutiny twice every half-term (I teach 17 classes), departmental inspections, internal inspections on individual teaching, trainee-Ofsted inspections as well as a whole plethora of internal work audits. Then we are expected to produce not only lesson plans, which are not always an Ofsted requirement, but also lesson plan booklets. These must include information on every SEN child, Free School Meal students, ethnicity, first language, attendance, current and past performance, more able and talented students, resources, seating plans with current levels and target

grades and of course any Individual Education Plans for any child on the SEN register. It takes at least four hours to produce just one. Imagine if someone is given two days' notice and has 8-10 of these to produce? Inspectors visit a class for maybe 20 minutes, yet the teacher is expected to produce one of these booklets for each class and to create and deliver a lesson of outstanding quality. This happens three times a year.

All of this makes for a 50-60 hour week, 70-80 prior to inspections. Staff often complains of being tired and over-worked, having no work-life balance and being unable to focus on actual teaching due to marking and other bureaucratic requirements. According to Ofsted we have become an 'outstanding' school; but in fact we as a staff only perform for inspections.

I would say that it is not the fault of the school, but the whole education system. Still, management could be a little more considerate towards an over-worked and in some cases, fractionalised staff. We could seek union guidance. The unions are impotent; because the previous headships made trade unionism a by-word for dissent and made it known that active participation could lead to an arrested career development. Therefore to be seen involving unions is perceived as dissension and can lead to ostracism from other staff members who actively seek career ad-

vancement at the expense of others. To be fair, the current head does support the strike action against pension changes and is accommodating in regards to leaves of absence. This does not negate from the fact they are over-seeing their tenure as head with an over-worked and near-exhausted staff who feel impotent to do anything about it.

I've recently taught in an academy school for over two years, and in that time I saw a lot of things that have angered me as a worker and as someone who values education, and made even more apparent to me the need for a radical overhaul in education that can only be achieved by revolutionary change in society as a whole.

The school is run by a large multinational company that provided a fancy looking building, great computer suites and lovely music facilities. Representatives made much of our students and parents as 'customers' and how we need to give them the 'service they deserve'. The flip side is that in some subjects we didn't have GCSE textbooks because we couldn't afford them. We didn't have enough classrooms for when the school grows. And we had class sizes of over 30 in some GCSE subjects, frankly appalling. At the end of the day, it's a business. And pennies have to be saved somewhere, hitting frontline staff and students the most.

The culture of the staffroom was odd. No one seemed to have a 'meta-critique' of education, and it was unusual to hear anyone question the policies we enacted in our school. The staffroom culture was definitely not one of dissent, which made organising all the harder (but not impossible).

The demographic of teaching staff has changed dramatically. Not only did the school have a very high turnover of teaching staff, but most of the staff were under 30, most had only been teaching for two or three years or so. Even the heads of departments had probably been teaching for four to five years on average. This made for an incredibly inexperienced workforce which is beneficial to management for (a) its total naivety (inexperienced teachers are more likely to assume that our practices are 'normal' and are also less likely to have been involved in workplace disputes elsewhere) and (b) its relative freedom from outside responsibilities (no families, no things that can stop them staying till 6pm every day to make sure that last bit of marking and data-entry gets done).

The relative inexperience and young age of our managers meant they were a bureau-

cratic authoritarian nightmare, willing to implement uncritically every whimsical change in policy and practice, parroting management jargon and viewing our pupils as 'customers'.

I love my subject, and I really value education for its own sake, but I want to work in a school genuinely run BY and FOR the community it is supposed to serve. As it is, even in a non-academy school now, I feel like I am barely teaching. It feels like service-delivery, like working in the bottom-rung of a two-tier education system - merely equipping students with generic skills that they can use in whatever demeaning, unfulfilling job they get, assuming they get one. With over a million people expected to face job cuts in the next few years and the possibility of £9k per year university fees, many of the pupils I teach will be unable to afford it. I do worry about their futures, and I'm conscious that I'm a part of that.

Some of my students went on a lesson-strike for an hour during the school walkouts, that was a brief glimmer of inspiration. Me and my workmates could have learned a lot from them.

Academies and revolutionary change

The cuts and 'austerity' measures are hitting education hard. The attempts to increase private involvement in education and further erode pay and conditions, as well as educational standards, through programmes such as the academies scheme, highlight the need for complete abolition of the existing system. The call for radical overhaul in the education system is for revolutionary change in society as a whole. Until workers and communities are in charge of all industries, we will never have an education that truly liberates us and aids our quest for better and more meaningful lives.

Education workers must resist attacks on their working conditions, and communities must fight the erosion and further manipulation of the education provision that should be liberating us, rather than churning out workplace fodder for the bosses. We want education run BY and FOR working class people, to meet OUR needs, not the narrow ideological whims of capitalists, politicians or religious cranks. The EWN seeks to build a revolutionary union for education workers, with the ultimate goal being workers control of education, in our interests, not bosses, churches, or the state.

Education Workers Network

EWN is made up of Solidarity Federation members who work in the education sector. Joining EWN also means joining your nearest SF group (solfed@solfed.org.uk or PO Box 29, S.W. DO, Manchester, M15 5HW for details). Even if you don't wish to join us, we welcome requests to join our discussion list (ewn@lists.riseup.net) and / or for bundles of Education Worker. Also available: EWN intro pamphlet; basic EWN intro leaflet; back issues of Education Worker.

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EWN Intro Pamphlet

Building a Revolutionary Union for Education Workers

Please send SAE to EWN (see address on left)

