

# Academies in the balance



Suddenly to stand alone in the vastly evolved educational landscape may seem

worrying. **Russell Hobby** of the National Association of Head Teachers offers advice for those Heads whose decision to convert still hangs in the balance.

**T**here are good and bad reasons to become an academy. Bad reasons include: for the money; to build an empire; and not wanting to be the last school left in the local authority. For those schools below the floor standards another bad reason is being forced to become an academy when you are already improving. Good reasons include sending a clear signal of change and an explicit need within your educational vision to make use of the freedoms on offer. In essence, the decision to convert should be driven from educational rather than financial, organisational or personal goals.

## It's not about the money

Let's unpick these reasons a little more, starting with finance. Any school which is converting in order to obtain more money is going to be disappointed. Any school which has made substantial long term spending commitments on the basis of greater funding is going

to deeply disappointed. The academy 'premium' was real but is fast disappearing. And when the majority of secondary schools have become academies, given that there are no extra funds in the system, school funding will be essentially the same as now. Further movement towards a national funding formula, which seems probable, will also iron out any local advantages. The findings of a survey by Reform and The Schools Network in March 2012, suggesting 78 per cent of schools were converting for financial reasons, may therefore be a cause for concern.

It is certainly true that academies receive the proportion of the money the LA would have spent on central services directly into their budgets. This money does have to be spent, however, on replacing those services (and some academies therefore choose to buy back into LA services). There may also be extra financial commitments in terms of maintenance, insurance, pension deficits and so on. There *is* a genuine opportunity here if academies can shape the way this money is spent to better suit their needs and many schools appear interested in this angle. This may mean that the same sum of money goes further or produces more benefit. They may not have needed all the services they originally paid for via the local authority, for example. One primary academy chose to directly employ an education welfare officer rather than buy into the authority's services; attendance was a serious issue in their community and they needed more direct outreach into pupils' homes. It is financial freedom, therefore, rather than *extra* money, which is the real gain here – and the value of this is derived from its link to the school's educational vision.

For opponents of the academy movement, this financial freedom is itself problematic. They argue that, by paying for services they did not need or consume, schools in more favoured circumstances were effectively cross-subsidising schools in more challenging circumstances. It would be better to properly and explicitly match funding to need, rather than use hidden cross-subsidies in this way.

### Splendid isolation

Some schools do not get on well with their local authority or their neighbours. They want to do their own thing without interference from others. At its worst, this is the precursor to empire building and vanity projects, avoiding one's role in supporting the needs of pupils across the community or even covertly manipulating the school's intake to ensure better outcomes. This is the worst of all reasons to convert and thankfully *extremely* rare. There is no glory in making one school better by weakening others; nor is there any credit in changing outcomes by altering the composition of the student intake – that is just rearranging, rather than solving the problem. It is vital – and there is absolutely nothing in academy status to prevent this – that

academies continue to play their role in the family of schools, sharing knowledge and sharing responsibility for collective challenges such as in-year moves, excluded students and funding decisions via the Schools Forum. One worrying trend, however, is academies opting out of facilities time (funding given to union reps, usually in the form of paid time off, to perform their duties), thereby weakening the role of professional associations locally; poor industrial relations are not in anyone's interests.

### Last one standing

There is intense pressure and momentum around academy status, fuelled by inaccurate headlines about the number of schools converting. Some leaders are therefore worried that LA services will decline to the point of unsustainability or that they will be increasingly exposed as one of the few maintained schools left in an area. Momentum is never a great reason for making an important decision but, in this case, it is also unnecessary. It is certainly true that many, perhaps most, secondary schools will become academies, although the rate of conversion is slowing down. Secondaries were rarely, in any case, highly dependent on the local

authority. The picture in primary, where most (approximately 17,000) of schools are located, is very different. Around five per cent of primaries have converted or applied to convert so far, and NAHT expects, assuming no dramatic change in incentives, that

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around 10 - 20 per cent of primary schools will convert voluntarily over the next five years. This figure is not evenly distributed, though, and there are some authorities with much higher or lower percentages, ranging from near zero to 30 per cent. Interestingly, the rate of conversion for special schools is running slightly higher than that for primaries.

There is a future as a maintained school. The local authority will certainly look different, offering fewer services with fewer resources. In many respects, it will be the job of those schools that want to remain in the LA to help reinvent their authority. The balance of power within the education system is shifting to the school level, so there is an opportunity to create something new. Many LAs are reeling from their cuts, and unable to give schools a clear rationale for remaining within their fold; those that can, and do, will be in a stronger position, but schools themselves can assist this process.

Even where the LA survives as a strong force, schools will increasingly need to support each other, as the authority will lack the same level of resources. Regardless of academy status, therefore, we strongly encourage members to look at local collaboration. This can be done as a maintained school (many members are interested in the co-operative model for example); the most important thing is to support each other – and to do it with rigour. Putting it starkly: the era of the standalone primary is ending.

### Forcing the issue

The discussion so far has focused on voluntary conversion, usually by successful schools. The academy process gets even more controversial where under-performing schools are forced to convert in order to kick start their improvement. This rests on the assumption that academy conversion is the most effective lever for school improvement. It certainly is a lever for improvement at secondary level (although there is no evidence for this yet at primary); the danger occurs when it is considered to be the *only* lever, and one that is guaranteed to succeed. The government's position in practice is dangerously close to this view. Yet it is clear there are other ways of improving schools work and that academy conversion is not always a success. And when imposed against the will of the community it can create turbulence and conflict which negate the benefits. As a system we need a range of improvement strategies, of which forced conversion is just one end of a spectrum.

We therefore have to ask what it is about conversion to academy status that is believed to trigger school improvement. Lessons from the early phase of New Labour's academies will offer only limited answers – these were largely high profile interventions in urban secondaries, backed by lots of money, vigorous sponsorship and intense political scrutiny. As the scope of the academy movement widens, these circumstances are unlikely to remain as applicable. At a very basic level one valid lesson is therefore that profile, attention and symbolism count. Converting to an academy *can* be a very clear signal that things are different and that what went before is no longer acceptable. This is intangible but, given the power of expectations in education, must not be underestimated.

The role of a sponsor can be helpful, particularly in supporting a head teacher through difficult decisions involved in turning a school around. Governance is central to performance and where there is organisational failure it is, almost by definition, a failure of governance – either not knowing what is going on or not acting to address it. Sponsored academies, particularly those in chains, can offer stronger governance than the traditional models, although this need not necessarily be so and, in fact, hasn't always been the case in practice. Where a sponsor lacks relevant educational expertise, they may struggle to exercise reasonable oversight. In any case, converter academies do not usually have a sponsor and therefore do not obtain this benefit.

Freedom and autonomy are important but it is hard to see why they, on their own, are a necessary or sufficient ingredient in these transformations, especially given that



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few academies exercise powers not generally available to maintained schools. The sad truth is that the real rationale for forced academies is probably to replace the head teacher. We have seen plenty of evidence, for example, that TUPE regulations are not being applied to head teachers, which is contrary to the law but adds to the pressure to accept a compromise agreement and depart quietly.

Thus, it feels like many of the effects of academy status on school improvement are secondary consequences, triggered or stimulated by the symbolic and political effects of the conversion, rather than by the on-going governance arrangements. It is about renewed leadership, either metaphorically or actually. And most of these effects can also be achieved within a traditional maintained school. In fact, these effects are regularly achieved within maintained schools: it is possible for any sort of school to succeed and excel if leadership is strong and determined.

This raises a disturbing part of the forced academies project – successful schools are being forced to convert due to a crude use of historical data and a preoccupation with the quantity rather than quality of conversions. Nearly a quarter of the first wave of sponsored primary academies were over the floor standard for attainment in English and maths, for example. Typical of these scenarios is a school improving rapidly from a low starting point with a new head teacher. It may be showing faster improvement than the vast majority of schools, but not yet have cleared the floor standards due to the historical legacy. In such circumstances, forced conversion can only distract a school and its leadership team from the good work they are already doing.

### **Management burdens**

It is also important for schools to be aware that academy conversion will place a lot more responsibility for management and administration on to the school. The fear of this may be part of the reason for slow take-up in the primary sector, as smaller primaries, particularly those with heads with a high teaching workload, may lack the administrative capacity. School Business Managers working in academies are also reporting a significant increase in their work. Multi-academy trusts, which share the administrative burden (and other possibilities like training and expertise) across a number of schools, are one solution to this but bring their own challenges of co-ordination.

### **Reasons to be cheerful**

So, what are the good reasons for conversion? Symbolism, in education, is not to be derided; sometimes a leadership team needs every method it can get to make it clear to pupils, parents and staff that things are different. However, the repeated point in this

article is that the most solid rationale is a clear education vision that requires different ways of working. There are a number of freedoms for academies that could in theory transform a school's practice, but only if they are used appropriately, consistently and coherently. And early evidence seems to show that many academies are making relatively little use of their freedoms.

The main freedoms are in terms of organisation of the school day, term and year; the curriculum, and pay and conditions (we've touched on financial freedom as well earlier). Some of these are less substantial than they might appear: maintained schools can already vary the day and year; and curriculum freedoms are heavily watered down in the face of high stakes national exams and tests at KS4 and KS2. Assessment drives the curriculum in England, although there may well be opportunities at KS3 – we'll have to see what emerges from the review of the National Curriculum.

The real opportunities lie in connecting the organisation and delivery of the curriculum with staffing and conditions, yet this is the one area that relatively few academies have been keen to experiment with. The survey by Reform and The Schools Network mentioned earlier also showed that two thirds of academies had no plans to change terms and conditions (and only 12 per cent had done so) and three quarters had no plans to alter the school day. This caution is understandable – mistakes on pay and grading can greatly damage an organisation and it is an area that takes expertise to get right. Applied with caution, however, some interesting possibilities emerge: a longer school day, with staff paid more or with shift patterns, for example; more PPA time and larger class sizes; a different structure to the school holidays; more innovative use of teaching assistants. The possibilities are limited only by the needs of the children and the available evidence on what genuinely works. Given that a school delivers its results and does its work through people, it is almost impossible to really change learning without altering working conditions.

## The untouchables

It seems that academies can only realise their potential benefits in the presence of strong leadership, and that the academy advantage lies in the support that conversion can give to leaders by reinforcing and signalling their vision. Strong leaders exist in non-academies too and can find other methods of changing expectations, so it is puzzling why we have come to rely so much on structural change in this country. It may be because structural change is tangible and 'announcable' – thus being advantageous to politicians who want to demonstrate progress. It is a common phenomenon for incoming executives in all sectors of society to rely on structural reforms for change at the expense of harder, longer and murkier reforms to culture, capacity and even process. These factors, too have been neglected in education reform in England, despite compelling evidence that teacher quality, expectations and leadership are powerful forces.

So far, this article has viewed academies from the individual school's perspective, in terms of what might be right and wrong for that school. Hopefully this has appeared as critical rather than anti-academy. If the decision is driven by the school on the basis of what will be best for their children, then conversion to academy status can be the right thing to do. However, academy conversion has a systemic impact as well, and it is concerned about academies' effects on the overall education system that lie behind much of the opposition to the movement. These concerns include:

- Fragmentation and competition on issues like admissions, exclusions and place planning
- Break up of national pay bargaining and reduction of union power
- Lack of nuanced or 'qualitative' oversight of performance
- Redistribution of resources
- Opening up the way to future privatisation
- Loss of local involvement and ownership (in the case of chains)

For some observers, of course, many of these are benefits rather than concerns! Some of them also rest on assumptions about how school leaders will behave in the presence of greater freedom rather than on the inevitable consequences of large scale academisation. There is no reason to believe that academy leaders will behave less altruistically than other heads; and unfortunately no grounds for suggesting that maintained schools always behaved altruistically in the past. Over 95 per cent of

academies report better relationships with local schools (although you'd want to ask their neighbours' opinions to truly test that statistic).

### A little local knowledge

From our perspective, the lack of nuanced oversight, which follows from the decline of local authorities and therefore the absence of someone beyond the school who understands the school behind the data, is the most worrying. School failure tends to be a slow and, initially, subtle slide; it may take a long time to show up in the data. In any case, we would ideally want to prevent failure rather than correct it after it occurs. Large scale academisation probably does raise the vulnerability of the education system to more 'catastrophic' failures taking us by surprise.

If fragmentation reduces the transfer of learning between schools then this, too, would be negative. A sense of independence, fostering initiative is fine but effective leaders don't want other schools to fail (they just want their own to be doing a little bit better). Use of evidence about what reliably works is generally patchy in education, given the disconnected mode of delivery in separate classrooms in separate institutions. If diversity leads to innovation, then we need a way of ensuring that successful innovation spreads – and preferably not in a Darwinian style of natural selection through failure. That is too high a price for the children of the failing schools to pay.

The role of academy chains is relevant to the discussion of wider impact. It is likely that small, well managed chains with a clear educational vision and a careful growth strategy, can assist both strong governance and the transfer of knowledge between schools in their chain. In fact, chains which specialise in a niche area of education (serving disadvantaged urban communities, for example) offer the prospect of very effective knowledge transfer. Large chains (and there has been speculation about chains of 2000 schools) that grow uncontrollably, will risk weak governance, patchy quality assurance and escalating bureaucracy. It is hard to see how such a chain would be an improvement on an LA; in many respects it would be just a local authority with the democracy extracted.

From the perspective of school leaders, the debate on academies urgently needs the ideology extracted (from both sides) so that we can make a rational assessment of the effect on students. This should be the only criteria and there can be no *a priori* judgements about this effect – it will depend on the school, its capacity and its community.

It is about how well freedom is used and what it is used for. And this may be problematic on the large scale. Freedom operates in the context of a system conditioned by decades of prescription to believe that, if it isn't regulated it isn't valued; where high stakes accountability colours every choice and generates extreme aversion to risk. Before we extend freedom further, we also need to ask why existing freedoms are under-used, why too many schools choose the fast and secure road to average, rather than the slow and risky road to excellence. Ultimately, it comes back to those intangibles again. The culture of our education system will determine the success of its structures.

**Russell Hobby is the General Secretary at the National Association of Head Teachers.**

## Knowledge trails

### 1) Strength in numbers: Is membership of an academy string always better than going it alone?

– One of the most often cited benefits of academy conversion is more school freedom, no longer governed by their LEA. However does joining an academy string remove the so called freedom dividend?

[http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/membership-academy-string\\_090112.htm](http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/membership-academy-string_090112.htm)

Article available in Leadership Briefings on the Professional Learning Community (access by subscription).

**2) Academies under fire** – Following last year's review of vocational qualifications thousands of equivalent qualifications have now been devalued. In this new landscape will academies still do better compared with all schools nationally?

<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/academiesunderfire.htm>

**3) Academies – If you can't beat 'em...?** – As debates rage over academy status in staff rooms across the country, this issue's Leadership Dilemma looks at the arguments for and against.

<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/academiesifyoucantbeatem.htm>