

Campaign for Real Education

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NEWSLETTER

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WISE REFORMS OR MORE CONFUSION?

On 27 July the Academies Act became law. But is it based on political spin or solid educational foundations?

Does pressure on the best schools to take academy status make sense, when all that was needed was to give them more freedom and better funding? Will they be held back by the requirement to take responsibility for an under-performing school? How independent is a faith-based academy that must keep 50% of its places for those of other faiths or none?

Hidden away on the Department for Education (DfE) website is a very disturbing statistic: in 2008, in the 62 longest established academies, the average percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more grade A*-C GCSEs including English and maths was only 28.7%. Even this percentage was dishonestly inflated by including the excellent results of several former city technology colleges, which were opened under an earlier Conservative government. The benchmark for a failing school is set at 30% and the national average for all schools is 50%. So despite all the taxpayers' money academies have consumed, on the whole they are failing schools.

A few weeks ago, we put in a Freedom of Information request to the DfE for a list of established academies and the percentage of pupils at each school achieving 5 or more grade A*-C GCSEs including English and maths in 2009. The information was refused by Prabjeet Pardesi of the DfE's Academies Policy, Finance and Performance Division on the grounds that the results are (usually) published on the Department's website. But to get it would mean searching through the results of around 3,000 secondary schools in 150 different local authority lists. So much for open government!

Research by Anastasia de Waal of Civitas has shown that fewer than half the GCSE 'passes' in academies are in academic subjects. Answers to Parliamentary Questions by Tristram Hunt MP show that only 1 in 5 academy pupils has been entered for GCSE history and even fewer for geography. Only 1 in 4 was entered for a foreign language. At one academy, not a single pupil was entered for GCSE geography out of a cohort of 147. As Miss de Waal told the *TES* (16 July 2010): 'This really does make a mockery of the academies being the flagship for improvement.'

Some academies have done their job. Too many others are little better than the sink schools they replaced. Has an honest cost/benefit analysis ever been done? Since when was it sensible to build on insecure foundations?

WILL 'FREE' SCHOOLS TAKE OFF?

Since the Conservative/Lib-Dem coalition took office, hundreds of groups led by parents and teachers have taken an interest in starting their own 'free' schools. Could this be the initiative that finally breaks the establishment's stranglehold?

Funded by taxpayers, 'free' schools will be free from local authority control, free to set their own curriculum and free to decide the pay and conditions of staff.

When Parliament returns after the summer, a new Education Bill will legalise 'free' schools and prevent local authorities from denying them planning permission – welcome steps in the right direction. Yet there are restrictions and there are dangers.

'Free' schools may weaken the grip of local authorities but, like academies, they will still be subservient to the whims of the secretary of state. How 'free' is a school that is compelled to follow the government's nightmarish admissions code? Why, despite massive demand for new grammar schools, will 'free' schools be banned from selecting pupils with similar academic ability, if that's what parents want?

Before the Education Bill has even been published, the New Schools Network (NSN), the 'independent' charity set up to promote 'free' schools, has been awarded £500,000 by the DfE. (*Guardian*, 6 July 2010). This, even though, the NSN is closely linked with 'progressive', DfE-funded bodies, such as the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) and Partnerships for Schools (PfS). Have ministers forgotten that these are the same people who created chaos by federating and closing good schools; and wasted billions of taxpayers' pounds on the now defunct Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme?

'Free' schools are supposed to be controlled by independent-minded parents and teachers. So why are so many 'experts', past and present members of the 'progressive' establishment, already gathering round 'free-schoolers' like vultures round a bloated carcass?

Who is controlling whom? How 'free' is 'free'?

DISAPPOINTING PRIMARY RESULTS

Results from this year's national tests show that more than a third of children left primary school without solid foundations in the 3Rs. Reading standards again dropped slightly, despite the educational establishment's (misguided and expensive) push for improvement.

On 4 August, *The Daily Telegraph* gave meaning to the statistics: "Hundreds of thousands of children will start their secondary education without 'getting the point' from passages they read, without skills in spelling or punctuation or being able to recite the 10 times table."

We have always argued that serious educational reforms should start with the primary sector. Ministers are making plans for primary reforms, but shouldn't these have been top of the list?

SCIENCE STANDARDS STILL TOO LOW

In a damning report, Ofqual, the exams regulator, says science exam standards are still 'too low', even after the exam boards had been told to raise them. One exam board was awarding a science GCSE grade C for only 20% of the marks. Another was awarding A grades for 47% (*Daily Mail*, 23 July 2010).

Meanwhile, two federated schools in Cambridge, where several governors and parents are university research scientists, intend to reverse the decline. In future, pupils at the Parkside Federation will take more rigorous International GCSEs in science as better preparation for A-levels.

Writing in *The Times*, Richard Pike, the chief executive of the Royal Society of Chemistry, has explained why politicians, exam boards, quangos and schools all have a vested interest in maintaining low standards. Exam boards, he explains, keep GCSEs 'meaninglessly easy' to protect their multimillion-pound textbook industry – exactly what others have been saying for years.

CODE OF DECEIT LIVES ON

Most people will remember George Orwell's 'Newspeak' in the appendix of *1984*. On 1 August, *The Mail on Sunday* published a memo that had been circulated among DfE officials. This listed the terminology civil servants used before the general election and the words they should use now.

'State' becomes 'Society, Big Society, a stronger society'; 'Targeted services' become 'Fairer services'; 'Delivery' becomes 'Implementation'; 'Directive' becomes 'Guide, empower, enable'; 'State control' becomes 'Social responsibility'. Instead of having to 'Lead change', officials must now 'Empower change/enable change'. Rather than 'Raise standards/qualifications', they should 'Build skills and competencies to innovate'. 'Stakeholders' are now described as 'People, volunteers, practitioners, professional organisations etc'.

Officials are advised that everything 'depends on the context the words are used in'. 'For example', they should, 'talk about outcomes in the context of impact'. Wouldn't it be better if they just called a spade a spade?

CUTS CAN BE GOOD NEWS

Thousands of sensible parents are delighted that the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme has been halted. This £55bn programme, which aimed to rebuild or refurbish every secondary school in the country, whether necessary or not, was disruptive, bureaucratic and wasteful.

Of the 200 schools supposed to be rebuilt by the end of 2008, only 35 were completed on time at an average cost of £20-£25m each. Before a brick was laid, local authorities spent millions of pounds just to help them decide what was needed.

News that the General Teaching Council (GTC) is to be closed down is also welcome. On top of fees from teachers, the GTC received around £20m a year from taxpayers. Yet on 5 July, a BBC Panorama programme reported that over recent years, only 13 teachers have had their licence to teach removed in England, 2 in Scotland, 3 in Wales and none in Northern Ireland. Around 15 years ago, when Chris Woodhead was chief inspector of schools, he was vilified for suggesting there may be around 15,000 incompetent teachers in the profession. So it was good to see him re-state his case on Panorama, this time with full backing.

Also gone is the ContactPoint database, which consumed around £250m recording intrusive details on every child in the country – all of which was available to thousands of state employees.

The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) is another quango whose days are numbered. With an annual budget in the region of £100m, Becta was tasked with promoting the use of new technology in schools and colleges. Good riddance to them all!

GREED IS OFFICIALLY ENCOURAGED

News that Mark Elms, the head of Tidemill Primary School in London, earns around £275,000 a year highlighted a disturbing trend.

The tendency towards 'executive' headships in the state system, where one head takes responsibility for more than one school (with higher pay for more pupils), means that heads earning £150,000 to £200,000 a year are increasingly common. So, too, are complaints that such heads turn into 'progressive' celebrities, enjoying term-time conferences and taxpayer-funded overseas trips, while their staff are left to run their schools.

There is evidence that, prior to the general election, senior politicians targeted heads to promote their academies policy, in some cases to the detriment of their schools. So governors may need to ask questions about conflicts of interest. Perhaps they should also consider whether any headteacher is really worth four or five times more than an effective classroom teacher?

LOCAL NEWS/UPDATE

East Riding of Yorkshire: Governors at a 'federated' East Riding secondary school were recently supplied with 250 pages of documentation to read in preparation for a governors' meeting. How such

bureaucracy can raise standards is a mystery, though it does explain why volunteers to serve on governing bodies are hard to find.

Gloucestershire: Officials from Gloucestershire County Council, NHS Gloucestershire and the headteachers of 19 primary schools made news when they devised and operated their 'packed lunch toolkit'. This was a scheme for emptying, checking and photographing children's lunch boxes. The contents were then marked for nutritional value and parents were advised accordingly. The initiative was defended by Dr Shona Arora, NHS Gloucestershire's director of public health. But Cllr Jackie Hall, the County's cabinet member for schools, was told nothing about it. 'This is a step too far and smacks of Big Brother', she told *The Daily Telegraph* (5 July). 'I have instructed our officers to cease this practice immediately.'

Lincolnshire: The situation at Boston Grammar School and Boston High School has greatly improved since the events reported in our Spring newsletter. Following the resignation of 'executive' headteacher Helen McEvoy, chairman of governors Tony Elmer, vice-chairman Lesley Hammond and business director Julie Bedford, both schools are back on track. On 5 July, it was announced that BSF funding to rebuild the two schools as one would not be forthcoming. This was exactly what those who have worked to save the schools predicted. But why did the local authority and Andy Breckon of CfBT, the educational charity paid to run their schools, allow such disruptive plans to continue for so long without a written guarantee of funding? After this announcement, the governors, now led by Phillip Bosworth, made the views of governors and parents very clear in a press statement: 'We believe it is vital we maintain two vibrant high-quality schools to ensure that our current pupils fulfil their potential, and parents can be assured of a sustainable future for grammar school education in the town.' But two important issues remain outstanding. First, despite the dedicated work of parent governor Charles Champion, there is still no resolution to the question of how and why John Neal, the former head of Boston Grammar School, was reputedly paid in excess of £200,000 to take early redundancy, when he had already announced he would remain with the school? Secondly, who will pay the £11,000-plus legal fees owed to Nottingham solicitors Browne Jacobson? The latter were hired by Mrs McEvoy and Mr Elmer without the agreement of the governors largely, it seems, to protect Mrs McEvoy's position in the event of her dismissal or 'defederation' of the two schools. Why should the schools have to pay?

Poole: The Investigatory Powers Tribunal has decided that Poole Borough Council acted illegally when it sent officials to spy on Jenny Paton and her daughters in 2008. Council officials suspected the family had lied about their address to get their daughter into a better school, so they used anti-terrorist legislation to watch their home and movements. Also breached was the family's right to privacy under Human Rights legislation.

Slough: Although BSF funding is now officially halted, the anguish felt by parents with youngsters at St Bernard's Catholic Grammar School remains. Still hoping to receive funding, and against the wishes of governors and parents, it appears that Slough local authority, the DfE and the local Diocese still hope to merge St Bernard's with an underperforming modern school to create a large, comprehensive Catholic academy. Why has no-one yet told parents whether or not the plans are shelved? Why is this uncertainty allowed to undermine St Bernard's as a future choice for parents? Please see www.savestbernards.co.uk for the latest news.

Somerset: Joseph Reynolds was horrified when his 13-year-old daughter spent 6 weeks studying *The Simpsons* in English lessons and watching the TV series for homework. Studying *The Simpsons*, teachers argued, would develop the 'critical thinking skills' of pupils better than English literature. Mr Reynolds complained to the authorities, including his daughter's headteacher and obtained 400 signatures supporting his argument. He also sought advice from former chief inspector Chris Woodhead's 'Any Questions' column in *The Sunday Times*. When Mr Woodhead's sensible reply brought him abuse from teachers too, he expanded his concerns in an article headed 'Children need to learn facts before they can have their own opinions' (1 August). Here, he explained that the national curriculum now includes an Orwellian 'global dimension' for children aged 11 upwards. Concepts to be studied include 'global citizenship, conflict resolution, diversity, human rights, interdependence, social justice, sustainable development, values and perception'.

Suffolk: Following the general election, parents with children at Clare Middle School were delighted to hear they would be among the first in the country to get their own, parent-controlled, 'free' school. Suffolk County Council had planned to close the popular Clare Middle School next summer and compel local children to travel to secondary schools around 10 miles away. The capital costs of keeping Clare Middle School open and enlarging it are only around half the amount that would have been required for the local authority's plans under BSF. Yet the authority refused to see sense. Now, after 3 years of campaigning, Diana Sharp and her colleagues, along with other groups in similar situations, have been rewarded with a visit to 10 Downing Street to celebrate their success. For the latest news, see www.stourvalleyeducation.org.

(N.B. Parents' groups in Bedfordshire facing similar situations are also delighted that BSF has been halted.)

RECOMMENDED PUBLICATIONS

Why Can't They Read by Miriam Gross explains why structured teaching methods are the most effective way of teaching children to read. Yet the trendy, child-led approach continues in many primary schools (and teacher-training colleges) for fear of damaging children's creativity. Published by the Centre for Policy Studies, it can be downloaded free at www.cps.org.uk.

A History of Britain, Book III (The Tudors) and Book IV (The Stuarts) were originally written by E.H. Carter and R.A.F Mears and published in 1937. Updated and edited by David Evans, a former head of history at Eton, these two excellent books have been republished by Stacey International (www.stacey-international.co.uk). They are billed as a return to real history, the first in a series of ten books, all of which will appear by 2012. The complete series will offer a chronological, narrative history of Britain from the Celts, Romans and Anglo-Saxons to the 21st Century.

Social Mobility Myths by Peter Saunders explains that many politicians are badly informed about the facts of social mobility in modern Britain. Because they don't know the facts, they support policies which are at best unnecessary, and at worst deeply damaging. Published by Civitas, it costs £8.00 – see www.civitas.org.uk.

The Broken University by James Stanfield finds no compelling evidence that public subsidies to higher education have produced any economic benefit. On the contrary, if hidden costs and unintended consequences are taken into account, government intervention in higher education does far more harm than good. £10.00 from the Adam Smith Institute, 23 Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BL (www.adamsmith.org).

Family Bulletin, Summer 2010, published by the Family Education Trust includes a transcript of a disturbing discussion between Jeremy Paxman and David Cameron, in which the latter confirms that faith schools will not be allowed to teach sex education according to the tenets of their faith. See Family Bulletin link at www.famyouth.org.uk

Patrick McEvoy and Harry Blackstock offer a useful website for teachers and parents seeking information on the teaching of reading by synthetic phonics. Their experience of teaching in England and Northern Ireland leads them to call for a consistent approach and much higher expectations – www.phonicsireland.com

SNIPPETS

Hundreds of schools are facing bankruptcy after signing up to Government-backed finance schemes compared to deals from loan sharks. Headteachers have borrowed a total of £5.2billion for new buildings but Treasury figures reveal the total repayments will amount to £18.5billion and take 30 years to pay off. Many schools say they simply did not understand the private finance initiative (PFI) deals they were asked to sign for improvements. *The Sunday Express*, 31 January 2010.

Amid all the furore over Government cuts on education spending, I thought it might be illuminating to find where some of the money already spent in the Building Schools for the

Future programme had gone. Kent County Council obliged with this mention in its Around Kent Pravda-esque offering: 'The days of traditional stand at the front and give 'em the knowledge teaching are now long gone. New teaching spaces which look a bit like plazas are open flexible spaces where students can gather in groups and work together. There are comfy chairs. Teachers are facilitators rather than following the more static approach in teaching.' No, I didn't understand it either. The frightening thing is, these numbnuts are educating our future generations. Nick Ferrari in *The Sunday Express*, 18 July 2010.

I would not remove every single useless teacher because every grown-up in a workplace needs to learn to deal with the moron who sits four desks down without lamping them and to deal with authority that's useless. I'd like to keep the number low, but if every primary school has one pretty naff teacher, this helps kids realise that even if you know the quality of authority is not good, you have to learn how to play it. Zenna Atkins, outgoing chairman of Ofsted, quoted in *The Sunday Times*, 11 July 2010.

The leaked HMIe (HM Inspectorate of Education in Scotland) report states: 'A number of head teachers, students and NQTs expressed concern about NQTs' preparedness to teach the basics of reading. They highlighted deficiencies in the understanding of phonics and how to develop progressively the reading skills of young children.' [However] "new teachers were ...seen as 'experts' on the Curriculum for Excellence, the SNP's controversial new teaching method being rolled out in the new school term. *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 August 2010.