Why would a school want to become an Academy?

To raise attainment?

The government claims that Academies are more successful than other schools:

‘Academies have been securing improvements in standards well above the national average’ (White Paper 2010, p16).

But the evaluation of Academies commissioned by the government itself doesn’t agree: ‘The evaluation suggests that there is insufficient evidence to make a definitive judgement about the Academies as a model for school improvement.’ (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2008, p220)

Evidence since then confirms it: ‘Overall, these changes in GCSE performance in academies relative to matched schools are statistically indistinguishable from one another.’ (Machin and Wilson 2009, p8)

Some Academies have raised GCSE scores more than other schools by adopting two strategies, according to a National Audit Office report in 2010, The Academies Programme:

1. They have changed their intake, taking fewer pupils on free school meals: ‘The proportion of such pupils attending academies between 2002-03 and 2009-10 has fallen from 45.3 to 27.8 per cent’ (National Audit Office 2010, p25).

It is the pupils from better-off backgrounds who have raised the results: ‘it is substantial improvements by the less disadvantaged pupils that are driving academies’ improved performance overall.’ (p27).

2. The second strategy is to enter pupils for non-GCSE exams which have a higher pass rate than GCSEs:

‘For later academies, the proportion of entries for GCSEs decreased more rapidly than in other schools, and the proportion of entries to GCSE equivalents in 2008-09 was seven percentage points higher than earlier academies, and ten percentage points higher than comparator schools.’ (p21)

More autonomy over the curriculum?

The government claims that Academies have much more freedom.

1. They say they are free from local authority control. But local authorities don’t control schools. Academies are in effect government schools. How much autonomy can be relied on when they are directly controlled by one person, Michael Gove?

2. They are free ‘to depart from aspects of the National Curriculum where they consider it appropriate.’ (White Paper p42)

But:

a) the National Curriculum is being slimmed down and all schools will have more freedom.
b) ‘all state schools will be held accountable for their performance in tests and exams which reflect the National Curriculum.’ (White Paper p42).

It’s the SATs and GCSE exams which determine what schools teach, and they are the same for Academies as other schools.

3. The evidence shows that Academies do the same things as other schools to raise standards: ‘In their efforts to improve teaching and learning, Academies are generally operating in similar ways to improving schools in the LA maintained sector.’

(PricewaterhouseCoopers 2008, p17)

**Freedom to control admissions?**

Academies are their own admissions authorities – but so are 42% of maintained schools – you don’t have to become an Academy.

Academies have to adhere to the Admissions Code - but there is still leeway to select. Is that why Academies want to control their admissions? If so, it isn’t to admit more children from poor backgrounds, it’s to admit more from better-off backgrounds in order to raise attainment scores: ‘Barnardo’s says handing schools control of admissions disadvantages poor children’ (TES 27 August 2010)

‘Studies have shown that schools that are their own admission authority are more likely to have admissions criteria that enable schools to be unfairly selective in their intakes.’ (Report by Professor Anne West, London School of Economics, October 2010)

**Freedom from union agreements on pay and conditions of work?**

Academies operate under private school legislation which means they are not bound by national and local union agreements. Some heads and governors want this – but most don’t, because it creates a jungle where schools are competing over pay and conditions, and many schools will lose out as a result.

Why would heads and governors want to break from union agreements? To improve pay and conditions, or make them worse? This is what the Times Educational Supplement magazine says, 14 January 2011:

“In reality, most academy pay scales differ little from the national norms and only principals and vice-principals command supersized salaries. Look carefully at what is on offer. An academy may pay its NQTs above the going rate in the maintained sector, but without the same level of progression higher up the scale.

And it’s not all about money. Some academies abide by the national ‘Burgundy Book’ agreement with regard to working conditions, but many have their own contracts, which tend to be less favourable. Key paragraphs to note include sick pay, maternity leave and working hours. Some academies require staff to be available during the school holidays, while others put no upper limit on working hours.” (p11)

Staff will be told that their pay and conditions are protected if their school converts to an Academy. This is a meaningless promise – the Academy can change them as it likes and staff can do nothing about it – except of course take industrial action.

**To get more money?**

This is the main attraction at a time when schools face cuts in their budgets. Schools converting get a share of the money the local authority holds back for central support services: the LACSEG – the Local Authority Central Spend Equivalent Grant. How much would a school benefit? The figures on the DfE website ready reckoner may not be accurate.

1. What is the impact on the school budget of the cuts plus the Pupil Premium?
2. How much money does the Local Authority currently hold back? It varies from authority to authority. Birmingham holds back 8.7% of the total schools grant.
3. How much of it would be handed over to the Academy? It is difficult to find out the exact figure – maybe half.
4. What local authority services does the school use? The school would have to buy these services itself. How much money would then be left as surplus?
Below is the list of local authority services taken from the DfE website:

**Services and costs funded from a local authority's Schools Budget**

- Special educational needs (SEN) support services (see next section)
- Behaviour support services
- 14-16 practical learning options
- School meals and milk
- Assessment of free school meals eligibility
- Repair and maintenance of kitchens
- Museum and library services
- Licences and subscriptions
- Central staff costs (maternity, long term sickness and trade union duties)
- Costs of certain employment terminations.

**Services and costs funded from other local authority sources**

- Costs of a local authority's statutory/regulatory duties
- Asset management costs
- School improvement services
- Monitoring national curriculum assessment
- Education welfare service
- Pupils support (e.g. clothing grants)
- Music services
- Visual and performing arts services
- Outdoor education services
- Certain redundancy and early retirement costs.

The local authority also retains some funding for services that it has to continue to provide, and related costs

- Home to school transport (including SEN)
- Education psychology, SEN statementing and assessment
- Monitoring of SEN provision, parent partnerships, etc

- Prosecution of parents for non-attendance
- Individually assigned SEN resources for pupils with rare conditions needing expensive tailored provision (this is usually a top-up to formula funding)
- Provision of pupil referral units or education otherwise for a pupil who is no longer registered at an academy

The cost of buying in services may wipe out any extra money from the local authority, bearing in mind that private companies will be selling these services at a profit and they may be more expensive than LA services.

In addition there are expenses which the school would have to cover – for example, maternity leave, which at present is paid by the local authority.

What about if there is an emergency – a boiler bursting, flat roofs leaking, a crisis on a school trip? The LA won’t be there to step in and help – will a private company?

Support from the local authority is particularly vital if a school does badly in an Ofsted inspection, or if results fall – which can happen to any school. Support by a private company would cost a fortune.

Are the governors aware of the huge extra workload and responsibility they would be taking on? Are they capable of coping? How long will the extra money last? It looks like only a year – the White Paper says in future schools could be directly funded by government under a ‘national funding formula’ (p80)

### Will becoming an Academy affect collaboration with other schools?

The government wants ‘schools increasingly to collaborate through Academy chains and multi-school trusts and federations’ (White Paper p12).

But Robert Hill, in a report for the National College in 2010, found that leaders of chains of schools ‘are failing to take advantage of sharing and learning from other chains. The conviction that the particular teaching and learning model they have developed is right could inhibit their
openness to learn from the experience of others, particularly since some chains are beginning to claim intellectual property rights for their teaching and learning model." (p32)

In other words, the school system is becoming increasingly fragmented and balkanised into competing groups of schools.

Furthermore, chains of schools with sponsors, and federations, mean that individual schools lose their independence and become subject to control by sponsors, executive heads and unrepresentative governing bodies.

**What impact will Academies have on the Local Authority?**

The spread of Academies will make planning school places in the interests of the community impossible.

The spread of Academies will create chaos in the admissions process.

The government says that ‘local authorities ‘will continue to lead the coordination of admissions arrangements for all schools…’ (White Paper p63).

But that will be impossible if Academies decide to control their own admissions.

The spread of Academies will destroy the Local Authority’s capacity to provide services to its schools.

Each school that leaves the authority reduces the money available for central support, until a point comes – compounded by government cuts in local authority budgets - when the services become unavailable and private companies take over. The schools which suffer most will be those serving poorer areas, which tend to need more local authority support. The result will be a further widening of the equality gap between schools.

The spread of Academies will destroy local democracy and accountability in the school system.

Because Academies are outside local authorities there will be no collective accountability to the community through elected local government. If parents have problems with their school local councillors cannot help – parents’ only remedy would be to complain to the DfE in London.

**A leap in the dark for schools**

Many of the factors affecting Academies are still unclear. Schools would be taking a fundamental decision – perhaps the most important one that a governing body has ever taken – without having full information, or being able to be certain about future government policy.

And the decision is irreversible. There is no provision for Academies to return to the local authority system if they find it doesn’t work out.

And of course headteachers and governors will change in the future. Whatever the promises made by the current head and governing body – for example to safeguard staff pay and conditions, or to keep the present admissions policy – there is no guarantee that a future head of governing body in a year or a few years time might not take the school in a very different direction.

**A fundamental decision which should be taken by all the staff and parents**

Schools can become Academies without any consultation at all with staff (apart from about TUPE arrangements), parents or the local authority. Some governing bodies are taking the decision before even informing parents.

About such a fundamental decision there should be full consultation with staff and parents and the wider community too, with the views for and against being presented fully, and the decision taken by a vote of staff and parents, not just a small number of governors.

Richard Hatcher, January 2011