

BHA BRIEFING 2003/2:

STATE-FUNDED "ACADEMIES" – ARE THEY DEMOCRATIC?

The BHA has serious concerns about the independence of (state-funded) "academies" and the undue influence that their wealthy, sometimes eccentric, sponsors can purchase in perpetuity in return for a relatively small one-off contribution. This influence extends to membership of the governing body, teaching appointments, and the school curriculum, and seems to us essentially undemocratic.

We are surprised that when other state-funded schools are to be encouraged to "earn" autonomy, these schools are given autonomy before establishing any kind of track record. They are, for example, freed from some of the requirements of the National Curriculum, as we were reminded when we protested against the teaching of creationism in Science lessons at Emmanuel College, Gateshead. This is a "privilege" that we find somewhat surprising, as the National Curriculum is considered good enough for most pupils and was expensively revised and updated only a couple of years ago.

At the moment, the expansion of the Vardy Foundation group of academies, with their promotion of creationism and other fundamentalist beliefs (King's Academy opening in Middlesbrough next year, and plans for several more), gives particular cause for concern.

Local parents, teachers and members of the public often feel that they have not been fully and impartially informed and consulted about these new academies, and frequently report to us that they only become aware of them after the important decisions have been made. Their difficulties finding out about local plans for new academies have been confirmed by our attempts. For example, although we are aware of plans for more Vardy Foundation academies, we can find no further details on the DfES website page on the Academies Programme, or the Vardy Foundation website. Such plans rarely appear on City Council websites or in councils' School Organisation Plans.

We would be very grateful if MPs and peers asked questions:

- about where and when new creationist academies sponsored by the Vardy Foundation may be expected.
- on how academies earned their autonomy.
- suggesting that local councils made much more use of their websites to inform and consult residents about school reorganisation plans.

Further information and questions follow, below and over.

About academies

"Academies are publicly funded independent schools. Their independent status allows them the flexibility to be innovative and creative in their curriculum, staffing and governance... The governing body will usually comprise sponsors, or their representatives, members of the local community, including a representative of the LEA, staff and parent governors. Governors have a unique opportunity to use their own areas of experience and expertise to support the Academy..."

(from the DfES website <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/academies/>)

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Further questions on academies:

- Isn't "publicly funded independent" a contradiction in terms? Should Government shrug off its responsibilities so lightly? When challenged about the curriculum or results of these schools, Ministers and the DfES will be able to deny liability – is that the true purpose?
- If flexibility and creativity (and freedom from the requirements of the National Curriculum) are such good things, why are they denied to the majority of schools, and why has so much been invested in the National Curriculum over the past decade?
- The "areas of expertise" and the balance of the governing body do not appear to be prescribed by the DfES, so how can parents and teachers stop governing bodies falling into the hands of people with little experience in education, or with their own eccentric agendas?
- Where is the evidence of better performance from the plethora of new kinds of school promoted by the Government? The existing research suggests that when "value-added" is factored in, specialist schools, faith-based schools, city technology colleges and city academies, do not outperform other schools and may also have negative effects on neighbouring schools.

For example:

Submissions to all-party committee of MPs on 20/11/02, from academic experts on specialist schools. As reported in *The Independent* of 21/11/02, MPs were told:

"Government plans for more specialist and faith schools will disadvantage poorer students because middle class parents will push them aside in the scramble for places... They also heard there was no evidence that these schools achieved better results than comprehensives, once the pupils' social backgrounds were considered..."

Richard Pring, professor of educational studies at Oxford University, talked about a "bewildering array" of types of secondary school, including specialist, faith, bacon and training schools, city academies and city technology colleges. He said, "The diversity is creating a hierarchy of schools, colleges and academies, with different funding bases, thereby creating increasing disadvantages for those already disadvantaged..."

Professor Stephen Gorard, from Cardiff University, said the Government's support for specialist schools was based on flawed research that failed to take into account the social background of pupils..."In areas where there are many specialist schools, there is more social segmentation," he said.

Professor James Tooley of Newcastle University...said he had not doubt that specialist schools were using "surreptitious selection" to improve their intake."

Stephen Gorard and Chris Taylor *Specialist schools in England: track record and future prospects* (Cardiff University School of Social Sciences, June 2001):

"SOCIO-ECONOMIC SEGREGATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS

29% of secondary schools in England became more 'privileged' in their intake between 1994/95 to 1999/00...[with] less than their local 'fair share' of children from families in poverty... This trend towards segregation is ...worse among ...foundation (42.6%), and voluntary-aided C of E (56.8%) specialist schools. The latter is particularly interesting showing that, however neutral the school admissions policies are except with respect to religion, religious schools are attracting or 'selecting' an increasingly privileged intake and this has implications for the current (at time of writing) proposal to expand this sector as well."

Research from Sheffield Hallam University, reported in the *Times Educational Supplement* of 26/10/01:

"Comprehensive schools are operating covert selection with some using every possible device to avoid admitting the dim and the difficult, says new research from Sheffield Hallam University. ...The existence of even one selective school in an area could trigger significant responses (either aggressive or defensive) from other schools and have far-reaching effects," the study says.. It also points out that the problems are worse for parents in areas of partial selection, with specialist schools and foundation and aided schools relatively free to set their own criteria. They warn that the polarisation of intake caused by selection will get worse as the number of specialist schools increases in line with Government aims."

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