

## ANOTHER SCHOOL, ANOTHER PROTEST

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People are evangelical about academies - either about their potential to succeed where the state has failed, or about the threat they pose to the comprehensive system. This weekend, for example, will see the second annual meeting of the Anti-Academies Alliance (AAA). Organisers from seven local anti-academy campaigns will meet with educationalists, the NUT and Tony Benn to debate corporate interests in education, admissions and the effect of academies on other local schools.

Meanwhile, in the Department for Education and Skills, Lord Adonis continues his matchmaking of sponsor to school, every one that signs up taking him one step closer to the target of 200 by 2010.

Last month, Adonis proclaimed academies had reached a "tipping point". A fourth major city is following London's Hackney, Birmingham and Manchester's plans for multiple academies, he said. Does that mean the anti-academy fight has been lost?

Ken Muller, a leading figure in Islington's campaign against academies, says: "There's a feeling of rabbit in the headlights of a juggernaut piloted by Andrew Adonis, but we've won campaigns against local academies. The AAA conference is an attempt to bring the local campaigns together. "

Unsurprisingly, Sir Cyril Taylor, the academy programme's most prominent supporter, disagrees: "They are wasting their time. We have 220 projects in the pipeline, 2006 results were the best ever, and all this about schools being turned into middle-class zones is nonsense. The idea that failing schools should just go on is potty. What people are misunderstanding is that the academy project is about social justice, not privatisation."

It's increasingly clear the anti-academy lobby has already had an impact. It has forced sponsors to back off in some areas. The fact that local authorities - the very organisations academies were supposed to be freed of - are now being proposed as sponsors points towards some not-so-subtle adjustment in the policy.

Adonis denies this. He says although sponsors have diversified, there are just as many philanthropists from industry and business getting involved. The opposition to the academies programme is straightforward fear of change, he told Education Guardian. "It's no surprise. Once [the schools] open, that opposition dissolves.

"It's only a matter of time before the critics have to concede that they don't have a case. I believe they are defending the indefensible - that it is better to have bad schools run on an old model, than successful schools achieving social justice run on a new model."

It's also clear that the government has no intention of backing off. It was willing to put £38m into one school to make it work, according to a parliamentary report - testimony to its absolute belief in the system and the need for each school to work.

Steve Sinnott, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, says: "Adonis will remain evangelical. I think he's wrong. He's enormously intelligent, but having that tunnel vision is not good for the service. What he does is raise unnatural expectations, which can never really be achieved, and schools suffer because of the huge pressure on them to achieve."

Politically, the Labour party accepted the terms of academies with the vote on the education bill. Ian Gibson, MP for Norwich and regular Labour rebel, says: "The Labour party has accepted it. It's very sad, a backward step for education."

He is campaigning against an academy in his constituency in the face of considerable opposition. "You should never give up," he says. "The way it feels now, though, it's going to be very difficult [to prevent a Norwich academy]."

Karen Buck, Labour MP for Regents Park and North Kensington says she was a "pragmatic supporter" of the scheme until Paddington Academy opened with her son as a pupil. The school is now in temporary buildings after construction problems. "I didn't expect problems with deficits and building management before the end of the first term," she says. She's now worried that the academy model has less accountability, leaving a "fantastic" staff picking up the pieces.

Muller suggests that while the government claims a tipping point in the programme, there is also a tipping point on the horizon for the campaigners. The more academies there are, they argue, the more parents will realise the pitfalls of the new schools. "I don't think we can stop it tomorrow, but we've got a head of steam. When parents realise what is happening, they will realise the problem."

The government immediately points to the PriceWaterhouseCooper report that found there were three applications for every academy place- proof that parents are backing academies, it says. The same report, say critics, suggests mixed results, with pupil behaviour remaining a challenge. Of the 11 academies that have been fully Ofsteded, one - Mossbourne - was graded outstanding in every respect, three are good, six satisfactory and one inadequate.

Sir Cyril says: "Parents are voting with their feet. That's the case with virtually every academy."

Clyde Chitty, head of education at Goldsmiths College and another speaker on this weekend's programme, says that at some point a pragmatic approach has to be taken, but for academies that point is still far away. "A few years ago, I was opposed to specialist schools. But now I have to accept them as a reality. We lost that battle and there's no point waging it," he says. "But the question of academies is still open. Not all of them have fantastic results. There's no proof that individual industrialists and entrepreneurs know how to run schools better than local authorities."

## **A tale of two academies**

### **Mossbourne Academy, Hackney**

Ofsted inspectors were "enthralled" by pupils at the school praising its "excellent curriculum, outstanding teaching and highly structured systems" and its robust procedures for examining pupils' work. "Consequently, pupils such as black boys who are otherwise liable to underachieve make exceptionally good progress." Its buildings were designed by Richard Rogers Partnership and its main sponsor is Sir Clive Bourne, a locally born businessman. The school aims to "create an environment in which students, adults and other learners feel safe, secure and are supported by clear discipline policies", according to its ethos, though there have been mutterings that that can mean ruling by fist. But it works: results are up and the school is massively over-subscribed. Five more academies are planned for the borough.

### **Paddington Academy**

The first day of term at the new United Learning Trust-sponsored academy saw teachers cleaning classrooms and trying to get them in a usable state. It was a far cry from what was promised. The new building wasn't ready and none of the hi-tech computers in place. Instead the school was in a dilapidated building where half the computers didn't work. And emergency measures for one term are now permanent until next September. ULT is now rushing to bring facilities from the new building to make their IT curriculum possible. No one seems to know where the half a million needed to sort out the facilities is coming from, says the local MP, Karen Buck. "We need to get the school back on track whatever that takes. We need to make sure this process of transition is better managed. I'm looking to make sure that this start doesn't mean a deficit in the future."