

Parents out, chief executives in: our schools will be anything but free

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Over the past six years Conservative ministers have introduced three grand reform schemes to turn public services upside down. The first was Andrew Lansley's awesomely complex top-down reorganisation of the NHS, now widely recognised as a disaster. The second was Iain Duncan Smith's equally complex scheme for welfare, known as universal credit, which has also proved disastrous because it entailed spending at least £700m in development costs for zero result. IDS has left office with his universal credit "rolled out", after nearly six years, to just 141,000 people.

The third grand scheme – to "free" English schools from local authority control and turn them into "independent" academies – may look more successful than the other two. The majority of secondary schools already have academy status. Now education secretary Nicky Morgan plans that all state-funded schools, primary and secondary, will become academies by 2022.

The policy cannot be called a disaster. The quality of children's learning is mainly determined by the quality of their teachers, and the outcomes of schooling – test scores and exam results – by pupils' socioeconomic background. Changing a school's name or governance has little effect on either, and nobody has explained coherently why it should. Some schools improve once they are removed from local council control, others get worse. That is the lesson not only from the English academies, but also from their nearest overseas equivalents, the US charter schools and the Swedish free schools.

What should concern us about the move to academies is not so much the effect on educational standards, which is marginal, as the effect on our democracy. In the coming fiscal year, state education will consume £102bn of public spending – 13% of the total, three times as much as public order and safety, more than twice as much as defence. Parents, if they cannot afford fees or organise home schooling, are obliged by law to use the service.

Schooling above all public services therefore demands democratic accountability. It may make sense to discuss taking the NHS out of politics, since much healthcare involves technical issues, there being no left-right divisions over the need to remove a malignant tumour. But in education, everything is politically contestable.

What children should learn, how they should be taught, tested and disciplined, how the needs of the most and least able should be balanced – people disagree profoundly on all these subjects, often on ideological grounds. Even the details of how to teach children to read – through phonics or whole words – have become matters of political division.

For nearly a century such issues were negotiated and resolved through a partnership of central and local government, parents and teachers. The precise balance changed over time, with parents particularly playing a greater role, mainly through elected representatives on school governing bodies. Teachers and local councils, it was widely agreed in the 1970s, had too much power, central government and parents too little.

The Tories, however, have taken us into entirely new territory. They propose to destroy anything resembling a balance. Ultimate power will rest solely with the secretary of state for education in Whitehall. He or she will be able to cut off a school's funding, in effect condemning it to death, without consulting parliament, much less parents or the local community.

Even more worrying, the majority of schools, including nearly all primaries, will be accountable for their day-to-day running to private academy chains. Though schools are supposedly being set “free”, the chains will control teaching methods, curriculum, performance assessment, and teachers’ pay and promotion. Local councils have never enjoyed such wide-ranging powers.

Some chief executives of academy chains make no secret of their ambitions to impose a standardised curriculum and standardised teaching styles, just as supermarket head offices dictate to store managers the prices of goods and their positions on the shelves. The head of one chain, covering seven primary schools, has spoken of a “standard operational procedure”; the chief executive of another, which has 67 schools, has said headteachers “will give up their sovereignty”.

Academies are not obliged to have elected parent governors, or even a governing body at all. One chain, E-Act, has plans to put all its 23 schools under a single governing body, a practice that was once common in local authorities but was banned by law nearly 50 years ago. E-Act will replace governors with “ambassadorial advisory bodies” which will merely “celebrate” achievement and “interface with the community”.

In other words, schools will escape “remote” town and county hall bureaucrats only to fall under the control of even more remote bureaucrats. Indeed, some academy chain executives are former local authority officials who, in their new roles, will enjoy enhanced powers – to say nothing of higher salaries which are often (to use the benchmark routinely applied to the public but not the private sector) more than the prime minister gets. In a letter to Morgan this month, Michael Wilshaw, the chief schools inspector, said that, at some chains, such salaries “do not appear to be commensurate with the ... performance of their ... constituent academies”.

Under the Tories’ plans, outlined in last week’s white paper, local authorities will have some residual powers, particularly over pupil admissions. What this will mean in practice is unclear. But it is beyond dispute that we are seeing a wholesale transfer of power away from locally elected representatives and a loss of democratic accountability.

Ofsted, though it may inspect individual schools, has only limited powers to inspect academy chains and even those were conceded grudgingly by ministers. Otherwise, the new school barons will be kept in check by just one national and eight regional commissioners, appointed by the education secretary.

The implications for the future are alarming. There are at present several hundred academy chains, so at least it can be argued that parents are able to opt for a different provider. But markets and quasi-markets – in effect the Tories are marketising schools even though the providers aren’t, as yet, allowed to make profits – invariably lead to consolidation. When the Tories privatised school inspections in the 90s, 120 providers entered the market. Twenty years later, all inspections were carried out by just three companies.

The Tories’ claim that academies can raise standards across the board is misleading. But the claim that such schools will be free should worry us more because it is nothing less than an outright lie.