

School academy plan 'doomed to fail', warns Blunkett

Former education secretary baffled by proposals to reform school approach

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Former education secretary David Blunkett has warned that government plans to turn all schools into academies by 2022 are doomed to fail and could turn into a fiasco similar to Andrew Lansley's NHS reforms.

Writing in the *Observer*, Blunkett, who was the first to develop plans for academy schools under the Labour government in 2000, accuses Tory ministers of seeking "permanent revolution" instead of organic change, in a way that could discredit the entire academies programme.

In his budget last week, chancellor George Osborne announced that every state secondary and primary school will be forced to become an academy by 2020, or to have developed a firm plan to convert by 2022. But this has met a wall of opposition from teachers, unions and many Tory leaders of local government.

Academies are independent, state-funded schools, which receive their funding directly from central government, rather than through a local authority. The day-to-day responsibility for running the schools lies with the headteachers or principals, but they are overseen by individual charitable bodies, called academy trusts, and may be part of an academy chain.

Currently, 2,075 out of 3,381 secondary schools are academies, while 2,440 of 16,766 primary schools have academy status. While the idea was invented by Tony Blair's government, the number expanded dramatically under the Tory-Lib Dem coalition.

Blunkett argues, however, that the original role of academies, which was to improve underperforming schools and raise standards by allowing those running them to have greater autonomy and to draw on expertise and best practice from outside, has been usurped by a Tory ideological obsession with removing all of them from any local authority control.

He says that many state schools are already judged good or outstanding by Ofsted and that a policy of forcing them to become academies, against the wishes of teachers and parents, would mean a costly, top-down reform process to address problems that don't exist, reminiscent of the health reforms of the last parliament.

"It is mystifying why so many primary schools, already judged good and outstanding, will be forced to conform to new structures, at huge cost, when money is so scarce," he argues.

"In high-performing localities, we appear to be confronting problems that don't exist, rather than concentrating on using flexibility and autonomy as weapons to tackle underperformance where standards have to be raised – the original objective of academies.

"It must be that someone, somewhere, thinks that ideological fervour and further expensive structural change is a substitute for improving what happens in the classroom, and that it will be supported by parents. Parents who are, we also heard last week, to be excluded from school governing bodies in a system run entirely from the centre by politicians. What kind of autonomy is this?"

The announcement that all schools must become academies has enraged many local authority leaders, including Tory leaders of local government who are bitterly opposed. Blunkett says that,

rather than taking them on, education secretary Nicky Morgan should work with them to solve the problems that do exist, including teacher shortages and a severe lack of school places.

“How, we should ask, are local authorities to be expected to fulfil their statutory obligation to find places for all children in their areas when they no longer have oversight of school improvement and planning and do not have the power to determine school expansion? It makes no sense. Not only are we addressing problems that do not exist in many parts of the country but we are stripping local councils of the means to address the real crisis over school places by removing their remaining powers.”