

PRESS RELEASE

Embargoed until 00.01hrs
17th March 2010



New academies could ‘fall flat’ unless bureaucratic morass removed

Plans to allow more independent organisations, including groups of parents or teachers, to run new state schools could fall flat unless the current tangle of state and local bureaucracies is removed, a report published by think tanks Policy Exchange and the New Schools Network will say today.

All three main political parties have signalled support for the idea of encouraging new schools to some degree, and all at least talk of giving more freedom to those who run them.

But today's report *Blocking the Best*, which focuses on the experiences of people and groups who have set up academy schools so far, found that there were a large number of barriers preventing new providers from entering the system, from a ponderous approval process to overly prescriptive planning and building requirements. The report makes a number of recommendations, including that new schools should ideally be exempt from local planning controls completely, with all applications going to the Secretary of State at the Department for Children, Schools and Families and that a national per-pupil funding formula, weighted to account for variations in employment costs, should be introduced.

Anna Fazackerley, Head of Education at Policy Exchange, and co-author of the report, said:

“It is clearly desirable to bring new providers into the education system to give parents more choice and drive up standards. Yet the practicalities of exactly how we achieve this have been largely ignored. Any new Government must identify and resolve the many legislative, bureaucratic and political barriers within the system or only a handful of schools will ever be set up.”

Rachel Wolf, co-author of the report and Director of the New Schools Network, which helps those who want to set up new schools, said:

“Obstructive planning laws and restrictions on providers are preventing new schools from being set up. As a result while the wealthy can choose - by moving into the right catchment area or paying school fees - the poor are stuck with schools which are often underperforming or do not suit their child. By freeing up the system to allow new groups of parents, teachers, charities and others to set up schools, parents of all backgrounds - not just the rich - will be able to access good local schools.”

Major obstacles to new schools identified by *Blocking the Best* included:

Planning and building regulations . In both Sweden and America successful and popular schools have sprung up in unconventional surroundings, including offices, warehouses and residential space. Here it is a very different story. One academy sponsor spent several years trying to set up a new school. In the end their architects and construction companies all agreed that it was cheaper to build a new multi-million pound fit-for-purpose building than it

was to refurbish something existing. This is not because of structural issues with existing premises, but because of the range of regulations and laws which make refits extremely difficult.

Planning laws to make it easier and cheaper to turn existing spaces into schools, and simpler to find space to build entirely new schools. **If the Government wants to drive up the number of new schools it should ideally exempt them from local planning controls completely, and all applications should go to the Secretary of State at the DCSF.** At the very least new schools must be freed from rigid restrictions on how big their classrooms are and how they use their space. P. 29

The academies programme was designed to deal with local authority failure, but local authorities now control the process of setting them up. The local authority now decides on who runs a school- to a considerable or total extent- whatever route potential providers go down. In some cases local authorities are extremely good, but even if they are not they have the ability to block any provider who might offer something better. **The local authority should not have an effective veto on the existence of a new school.** P. 20 & 22

Money for new school projects is being wasted on fees for unpopular and ineffective consultants: Once permission for a school has been provisionally granted, the sponsor must choose one of about a dozen approved Project Management Companies (PMCs), although under EU rules they are not allowed to meet them in advance. Project management fees are very high – most sponsors we spoke to paid at least £500,000 – and quality is variable and unpredictable. Some sponsors told us that they had to do some of the work the PMC team was contracted to do, without any reduction or transfer of fees. All the sponsors we spoke to were dissatisfied with the service provided. **Academies should be able to opt for alternative project management arrangements. The expense of project management companies has been a huge drain on resources – which might have been better spent on core staff in the academies unit, amongst other things.** P. 23-25

Postcode lottery for per-pupil funding given to schools: one academy provider we spoke to had set up two schools in deprived areas sixty miles apart. The difference in funding between the two areas was £1,000 per pupil, leaving one school more than £1 million poorer than the other. **A national per-pupil funding formula, weighted to account for variations in employment costs, should be introduced.** pp.40 & 45

The report also warns that much of the freedoms that new academy schools are supposed to enjoy, do not really exist, or have been eroded over time.

- Academies in theory they have the freedom to set their own pay and conditions, But in reality academies taking over existing schools often struggle because they are legally obliged to take on the staff – regardless of their performance - from the failing school. Local authorities often only give details about teaching staff two weeks before the school opens, and removing poor quality teachers is a difficult and lengthy process. P. 51 - 55
- Making schools properly accountable to parents and the Government is crucial. But Ofsted is increasingly focused on non-educational outcomes, using schools to try to solve wider social problems. The revised school inspection framework sets out a range of judgements to which inspectors must give 'particular priority' – these included, for example: promoting equality of opportunity, safeguarding children and responding to parents' views. Schools that may be providing an excellent education

to its students, but can be labelled 'inadequate' overall if Ofsted inspectors find fault with its procedures for promoting equality, or for safeguarding its pupils. P. 61 - 63

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Notes to Editors

A full copy of *Blocking the Best – Obstacles to new, independent state schools* is attached.

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