

Campaign for State Education (CASE)

To members of the House of Commons Education Select Committee

23rd March 2025

The passage of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill currently going through Houses of Parliament has reinvigorated discussion about the impact of the introduction of academies into the state education system in England, as some provisions in the bill will change how they operate. CASE welcomes this discussion as an opportunity to challenge the unevidenced assertions coming from both sides of the House of Commons that they have brought about significant improvements in the English education system. We believe that there is strong evidence to suggest a very different conclusion.

Whilst academies were first introduced by a Labour government it was Michael Gove who lead legislation to amplify the principles of embedding quasi-commercial principles into public services. Had the Tory party remained in power they would have pushed for a 100% academised school system. As it is just, under 50% of English state schools are academies, although this varies by sector, with around 75% of secondary schools and circa 40% of primary schools. Similarly just over 50% of English state school pupils attend academies. If it was such a boost to outcomes you would expect the sector to have expressed its confidence in it with a higher number of transitions. Whilst many of these would have been compulsory, for apparently 'failing' schools, the majority of the programme is meant to be voluntary, with the obvious benefits seeing the programme sell itself. It did not, so legislation was drawn up to finish the job.

The legislation fell, despite the supporting document, "The case for a fully trust-led system." https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62865295d3bf7f1f433ae170/The_case_for_a_fully_trust-led_system.pdf (March 2022) This made the claim that, "Where schools underperformed, they were increasingly transferred into multi academy trusts (MATs) as sponsored academies. The impact has been transformative - more than 7 out of 10 sponsored academies are now rated Good or Outstanding compared to about 1 in 10 of the local authority maintained schools they replaced." Given that the the promise of compulsory – ie 'sponsored' – conversion was that failing schools would be redeemed, the fact that this did not happen with 30% of such schools is not a compelling argument.

In fact the House of Lords briefing, "Improving schools' performance: Are multi-academy trusts the answer?" <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/improving-schools-performance-are-multi-academy-trusts-the-answer> (September 2023) found in the government paper that, 'Data on Ofsted ratings does not show that schools in MATs have better ratings than other types of school,' and, 'On academic results the picture is mixed The percentage of pupils achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths was, on the whole, slightly higher in maintained schools than in MATs.'

Similarly research by the Local Government Association published by the Guardian under the headline ‘Council-maintained schools in England outperform academies in Ofsted rankings,’ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/03/council-maintained-schools-in-england-outperforming-academies-in-ofsted-ratings#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20council%2Dmaintained%20schools,the%20same%20since%20they%20converted>. went on to quantify this difference, ‘45% of academies that were already an academy in August 2018 managed to improve standards from inadequate or requires improvement to good or outstanding, compared with 56% of council-maintained schools.’

Whilst there is no evidence that the introduction of academies into the English school system has, in itself, raised standards in schools, there is evidence that it has brought about other, perhaps unintended, changes.

For a start it has made the system messier. Where once state education was provided by local authorities, with a bit of variation around church schools, now every borough has a plethora of providers for its schools, as the website <https://fragmentedschoolsystem.org.uk> readily demonstrates. The London Borough of Bromley, for instance, now has 29 trusts running 94 of its schools, whilst still running 11 schools itself. Whereas in neighbouring Lewisham the council has 70 schools, with nine trusts running a further 17. This piecemeal, fragmentary picture has been deliberately created across England. Part of its agenda of diminishing local government in favour of private, commercially driven, entities. Ones that don’t necessarily espouse the ethics and values that have underpinned public services for decades.

This is very evident in the controversy around executive pay in large multi-academy trusts (MATs). As the Public Accounts Committee put it, ‘Unjustifiably high salaries use public money that could be better spent on improving children’s education and supporting frontline teaching staff.’ (PAC 2018). The Campaign for State Education (CASE) commissioned a report into this from education journalist Warwick Mansell, entitled, “Systems Matter: the cost to classrooms of the academies programme.” (May 2023) <https://www.campaignforstateeducation.org.uk/case-report>

Mansell compared the pay of managers and administrators of MATs with that of local authority staff running children’s services. He showed that ‘The 50 largest academy trusts had seven times as many people paid at least £130,000 a year as did the 10 largest local authority areas, despite the two sets of organisations educating roughly the same number of pupils, with the trusts spending eight times more per pupil on £130,000-plus employees than were the local authorities.’ As all English state schools are funded at the same per pupil rate we must conclude that less money is going into classrooms in order to fund this.

Recent articles by The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/mar/16/hundreds-of-english-academy->

[heads-paid-over-150k-as-number-on-gravy-train-doubles-in-five-years](https://schoolsweek.co.uk/revealed-the-academy-ceo-pay-premium/) and Schools Week <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/revealed-the-academy-ceo-pay-premium/> show that this trend in exceptional CEO pay continues, with the number of senior staff in MATs earning over £150k pa doubling in the last five years.

Whilst MATs might argue that economies of scale mean they are lowering costs and overheads, in “Understanding the Middle Tier: Comparative Costs of Academy and LA-Maintained Sectors,” (Local Government Association 2019) <https://www.local.gov.uk/understanding-middle-tier-comparative-costs-academy-and-la-maintained-school-systems> the authors found that, ‘Large MATs might be expected to gain from economies of scale, but the figures do not support this. As an analysis of income and expenditure shows, academies belonging to large MATs (11+ academies) had the highest cost per pupil.’

The question then becomes, How can MATs afford to pay these inflated executive salaries?

To answer this CASE again turned to Warwick Mansell and in October 2024 published

“Systems Matter II: the impact of the academy system on staffing.”

https://www.campaignforstateeducation.org.uk/files/ugd/3dd219_7806a9356ef849258257eb0010285ea.pdf

Here Mansell found that in large MATs, ‘Classroom teachers within the local authority maintained sector are paid more, on average, within both primary and secondary schools, than are their counterparts from the academies sector.’ With an even greater differential in schools that had been compelled to convert due to Ofsted outcomes. This difference in pay could be for a number of reasons. For one, ‘Teachers in academies, and in sponsored academies in particular, tend to be younger – and therefore less expensive – than their counterparts in the local authority maintained sector.’

Another is that large MATs employ a higher proportion of unqualified teachers, ‘the rate within sponsored primary academies is double that of local authority primaries, while it is 55 per cent higher in sponsored secondary academies.’

Perhaps it is unsurprising that these trusts also have a higher turnover of staff. Education Policy Institute research published in April 2024 <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-features-of-effective-school-groups/> found that MATs ‘have higher rates of workforce turnover than local authorities.’ Further analysis by Mansell showed that, ‘some of the largest chains are losing up to a quarter of their teachers – in one case, the figure was 30 per cent – each year.’

Maybe these teachers are leaving teaching because of limitations placed on their professionalism. Kevan Collins, the government’s School Standards Tsar was quoted in SchoolsWeek in November 2024 saying he had, “never seen teachers more enslaved”, with some “being told what to do” in “every lesson”. This could be a result of the use of greater

numbers of unqualified staff who are seen as simply there to read a script against the background of a prescribed presentation. We have the growth of online repositories of oven-ready lessons, such as Oak Academy <https://www.thenational.academy/> set up during covid and subsequently developed with government funding.

At another level, the current legislation leading to perverse decision-making. Whilst local authorities are responsible for place planning – ensuring there are sufficient places within their area for the number of school age children – they no longer have the capabilities necessary to do so. Since 2012 all new schools must be academies, their existence and location determined by the civil servants of the Regional Schools Commissions. And they don't have the authority to close or merge academies, only the schools that they themselves run. Because of this, in Autumn 2023 Hackney council was forced to close four of its own schools even though they were not necessarily in areas that were undersubscribed. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/council-faces-legal-challenge-over-falling-rolls-closure-plan/>

An even more bizarre case in the Summer of 2024 found Islington council forced to close one of its schools deemed 'Good' by Ofsted because one that had been found inadequate was converting to an academy and therefore beyond the reach of the local authority's decision-makers. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/council-loses-court-fight-over-falling-rolls-academy-plan/>

The ideologically driven expansion of the academies programme has not provided its intended outcome, that of driving up school standards. Rather in freeing up salary constraints it has driven up executive remuneration and driven down classroom pay. Further freedoms in curriculum content and delivery have seen teachers' professionalism eroded, with greater numbers leaving our schools, and unqualified staff coming in to do the job.

The disruption of the school system intended by the 2012 legislation has run its course. Our children are not achieving better outcomes than if local authorities continued to run schools. Our teachers are lower paid and demoralised, and our local provision is fragmented and forced into irrational decisions.

The changes in academy powers and place planning proposed in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill are to be welcomed, however, there are other changes that would enhance these further.

The government recently moved to close NHS England because of the duplication of functions with the Department of Health. In education a similar move could be made to close the offices of the Regional Schools Commissioners as responsibilities for opening and closing schools will return to local authorities. This would save £35m pa.

The move to reinstate national pay scales in MATs and academies and to require all teachers to be qualified are also welcome, however, this will not affect some of the highly paid managers and administrators in MATs. This could be addressed by requiring them to be on local government pay scales.

A greater emphasis on children's wellbeing should also see an evidence based enquiry into effective discipline in schools to address some of the harsh and inhumane policies that some MATs have introduced. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/nov/23/teachers-at-mossbourne-academy-in-hackney-screamed-at-and-humiliated-pupils-say-angry-parents>

CASE believes that there is no evidence to show that the expansion of the role of academies in the English school system has lead to improvements in school provision. Rather, that the changes that have come about have not been beneficial to schools, staff, or pupils.

Yours sincerely

John Galloway and Melian Mansfield

National co-Chairs Campaign for State Education

23rd March 2025