

## Educational social policy: part 10; **The great academy schools scandal**

**This is a very useful article that examines the performance of academy schools. You should read it and take notes so that you can use contemporary examples of the failings of recent educational policy. I have highlighted key points in red font throughout the article.**

They were hailed as education's great leap forward. But across England, the trusts that run them are failing



**Sonia Sodha, The Observer newspaper**

Sun 22 Jul 2018 09.30 BST



Teachers in London protest against the Conservative government's education policies, 2013.  
Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian

Kinsley Academy may officially be less than three years old, but its redbrick buildings stand as a reminder that there has been a primary school here, serving this rural, former mining community in West Yorkshire, for well over 100 years. Jade Garfitt didn't hesitate to send her son, aged five, to the school: Kinsley born and bred, she felt she'd got an excellent education there herself.

But since he started she has become increasingly concerned. "He's received one piece of homework this academic year," she tells me over a cup of tea in the community cafe across the road. "He's only done PE once since November. At one point, his class went two weeks without having their reading books changed. If you tried to say, 'Look, there's issues here', you'd be shooed away."

She says her son was for months taught by a revolving door of supply teachers. "They never introduced themselves. We never knew their name. The children were really unsettled, crying, not wanting to go to school."

Kinsley is part of a wave of schools that have converted into academies – state-funded but independent of local authority control. In 2015, it left the auspices of Wakefield council to become Kinsley Academy, joining one of the hundreds of charitable companies the government calls "multi-academy trusts", which between them run thousands of schools across England. This is a key plank of the

government's schools strategy under which high-performing schools in each trust help the struggling ones improve.

But in Kinsley, the reverse has happened. Lauded by Ofsted a few months before it joined the Wakefield City Academies Trust, Kinsley has seen **standards plummet to well below the national average**. "I've had to go to teachers to ask for homework. I've had to argue with them to change my son's reading books. I've taught him all his times tables at home," Sarah Jones, who has two children at the school, tells me.

Jade and Sarah are just two of thousands of parents in West Yorkshire affected by a large-scale educational failure, whose ripples have been felt far beyond Kinsley. In fact, their worries are being echoed across England amid growing concern that **something may be seriously amiss with the government's academies experiment**.

**Wakefield City Academies Trust** was in 2015 named a "top-performing" academy sponsor by Nicky Morgan, then education secretary, and handed a £500,000 slice of a £5m fund to improve schools in the north of England. Since then, things have gone awry. **The trust has sunk to the bottom of the league tables to become one of the lowest-performing academy chains in the country. And it has been plagued by question marks over its finances.**

In July 2016, the Education Funding Agency investigated the trust. Its draft report, leaked to the TES, found that **its interim chief executive, the businessman Mike Ramsay, had paid himself £82,000 over a three-month period**. It concluded that the trust was in an "extremely vulnerable position as a result of **inadequate governance, leadership and overall financial management**". Later that year, it was reported that the trust had paid almost £440,000 to IT and admin companies owned by Ramsay and his daughter.

The trust was nevertheless allowed to carry on. Then, in September last year, it suddenly announced it would be looking for new sponsors for all 21 of its schools – but not **before it had transferred more than £1.5m of reserves from its schools to its central coffers, entirely permissible in the current system. Some of this was funds raised by parents**. It's not clear whether any of this money will be left when the trust winds up, or whether those schools will see it again.



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Kinsley Academy a member of the Wakefield City Academies Trust, West Yorkshire. Photograph: Gary Calton for the Observer

“The [collapse of Wakefield City Academies Trust](#) has sent shockwaves through our area,” says the local Labour MP Jon Trickett, who has for months been seeking answers from the government. “For many parents, it has been disturbing to find that their children’s futures could be threatened by **the recklessness of people with very limited educational experience.**”

**Wakefield City is one in a series of high-profile failures of trusts forced to give up all their schools.** The magazine *Schools Week* reported just last week that **Bright Tribe, the trust with the lowest-performing secondary schools in the country, would also be closing and handing back its 10 schools.**

**Are these failures the inevitable consequence of a quasi-market system, predicated on the idea of takeovers? Or a sign of something deeply rotten at the heart of the government’s flagship education policy?**

Academies have been a jewel in the education policy crown for both Labour and Conservative governments in the past 25 years. According to Professor Becky Francis, director of the Institute of Education at University College London,

Labour's academies programme was "focused on the revitalisation of schooling as an engine of social mobility in deprived areas". She says the idea of bringing in business and philanthropic sponsors – including big names such as the London-based French financier [Arpad Busson](#) – "not just for money but for expertise" was **controversial** from the start.

But although the Labour government hugely talked up its academies programme, there were only around 200 of them – 1% of all English schools – by the time it left office in 2010. It was [Michael Gove](#), the incoming Conservative education secretary, who put turbo boosters under the policy. By the time he left the job in 2014, the number had rocketed to **almost six in 10 secondary schools, and one in five primaries.**

**What drove this? Not the evidence**, according to Francis. Even as the explosion was taking off, "the **DfE's own evidence showed there was hardly any difference in outcomes between academies and local authority schools, once you controlled for their pupil intakes,**" she says. She puts it down to "a strong ideological dislike of local authority influence, and a faith in autonomy and marketisation".

The first academy chains were born out of the Labour government's effort to introduce more stability into the system when it realised that there were significant risks to setting up independent, state-funded schools. They were embraced by the coalition government for similar reasons.

**Mark Lehain**, interim director of New [Schools](#) Network, is a champion of this model. "In Bedford, where I used to teach, there were failing local authority schools left to fail generation after generation of kids," he says. For him, **a big advantage of academy chains is that you can remove a school from a failing trust and give it to one better placed to turn it around.**

There's also an intuitive advantage to the chains: **if someone is running one school brilliantly, isn't it a waste not to get them involved in running more?** "If you've got a school that's functioning well you can develop a group of schools that can learn and build from that," says Sam Freedman, a former special adviser to Gove.

**That's the theory. The problem is that it hasn't quite happened like that in practice.** There have been several studies in the past few years that have invariably reached similar conclusions: there doesn't appear to be an inherent benefit to a school being run by an academy chain instead of a local authority. **"There are a handful of trusts achieving amazing things, but a much longer tail of trusts**

**performing really poorly,” says Francis. Her analysis shows six in 10 academy chains have below-average attainment for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.**

What’s gone wrong? “I think there was certainly a mistake in the early days of the coalition, where we let so many schools convert at once, and allowed some chains to build too fast and unsustainably,” Freedman says of his time at the DfE. [According to the Commons public accounts committee](#), **there were simply too few checks on schools wanting to become academies:** the government rejected just 13 out of more than 2,000 applications in three years. Trusts haven’t had to prove themselves before taking on new schools in difficult straits: Wakefield City Academies Trust took over [14 schools in special measures](#) in under three years. “There was a period after 2011 where the academy system felt like the wild west, with big personalities coming in and changing things with little educational justification,” says Francis.

**Some of those personalities took big financial liberties, paying themselves far in excess of what a local authority head could earn, and spending taxpayer cash on services provided by companies linked to themselves or family members.**



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President Barack Obama and David Cameron at Ark Globe Academy in south London, 2011.  
Photograph: WPA Pool/Getty Images

“In the case of Wakefield City [Academies Trust](#), **related-party transactions look like a convenient way to sidestep laws that prevent people profiting from schools,**” says Trickett. “If the reports of financial problems at other chains are true, the government may find its plans to give trusts millions to expand have the effect of pouring water into a leaky bucket.”

**Once a school joins a trust, there’s no going back: its reserves and buildings are absorbed into the legal entity of the trust. “If a school thinks it is getting poor services from its academy trust, there isn’t much it can do about it,” says Laura McInerney, former editor of *Schools Week*.**

The only way out is in the case of serious failure. But that can take a long time to get noticed. Parents are often the first to spot it, but it can be hard for them to be heard. Even MPs can meet a wall of silence. “**A culture of secrecy** prevailed,” says Trickett. “The letters I wrote to the trust elicited wholly inadequate responses.”

Even when failure is eventually recognised, finding a trust to take over struggling schools can be difficult. The government has no power to compel trusts to take over schools. Lots of these schools will also have serious financial problems, whether as a result of mismanagement, falling pupil rolls, or long-running unmanageable PFI contracts. This makes them an unattractive proposition to other trusts, who themselves have to stay afloat at a time when schools funding is getting tighter.

But takeover regardless remains the main school improvement game in town: **since 2016, the government has required all schools rated “inadequate” to become academies. The pipeline of schools in limbo is growing: over six in 10 rated inadequate by Ofsted in 2016-17 [had not opened as an academy nine months later.](#)**

The takeover process is overseen by eight regional school commissioners. “**Parents have no right to a consultation on who should sponsor their school, let alone any kind of veto or vote,**” says McInerney. “The meetings where decisions are made are secretive, with only the barest of minutes.”

Potential conflicts of interest abound within opaque, interconnected circles: [the Conservative peer Lord Nash](#) was for years a schools minister while chairing an academy chain accountable to the government department he helped to run.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that **an incredible amount of time and energy – not to mention at least £745m, according to the National Audit Office – has been invested in a huge reorganisation that has delivered patchy benefits at best.** “I fear this exclusive focus on structures has led to policymakers taking their eye off the ball in relation to the most important element of the education system, quality of teaching,” says Francis.

**There are plenty of fixes on the table. McInerney thinks there should be a clampdown on high pay, [a lock on school assets](#), and that local authorities should be able to spin out their own academy trusts.** Others have suggested [banning](#)

**related-party transactions**. The question is whether Theresa May's government has the inclination or bandwidth to do any of this against the backdrop of Brexit.

As the summer holidays begin in Kinsley, Jade and Sarah tell me they are hopeful things will improve now that their children's school has transferred from Wakefield City Academies Trust to a new trust. But could it all happen again somewhere else?

"No lessons have been learned," says Laura McNerney. "Pressure is still being put on academy chains that are too small and fragile to take on board tricky schools. There are no consequences for people who flout financial regulations. It's not a case of whether there'll be further collapses, but simply of when and where."

### **Trusts that failed the test**

Ever since Tony Blair opened England's first academy, the Business Academy Bexley, in 2002, these schools have been the Marmite proposition in education: loved by some, hated by others. It was under a Tory education secretary, Michael Gove, that their numbers really took off. In 2015, David Cameron, then prime minister, told his party conference that he wanted every school in England to be an academy by 2020. But the past two years have been marked by a series of high-profile failures.

#### **July 2016**

**The Lilac Sky Schools Academy Trust** is forced to give up its nine schools. Its accounts reveal that it used public funding to pay consultants more than £1,000 a day even as it was drawing on emergency public funding to ensure classrooms could open with basic equipment and furniture.

#### **March 2017**

**The Education Fellowship trust**, founded by Sir Ewan Harper, a key influencer of Tony Blair's academies policy, says that it will be giving up its 12 schools. The move follows a series of damning Ofsted judgments and serious financial problems.

#### **November 2017**

**The Wakefield City Academies Trust** makes a shock announcement that it would be pulling out of all 21 of its schools, having been plagued by questions over its finances. Revelations include the payment of more than £400,000 for services to companies connected with its chief executive and his daughter.

#### **January 2018**

**The Perry Beeches Academy Trust**, which David Cameron once praised as "a real success story", says it will hand over its five schools after reports of **financial mismanagement**. The trust paid an additional salary of £120,000 over two years to its former chief executive on top of his £80,000 annual salary.

