

# The academies policy

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# A little about me

- Started my career in local journalism in 1995, covering local councils among many other things
- Nine years as reporter with Times Educational Supplement, covering academies policy since 2000.
- Freelance since 2008. Writer of the Guardian's education diary, 2012-17, which led to many people contacting me about goings-on on the ground
- Founded the website Education Uncovered in 2017. Covering schools reform, mainly. Set up specifically because I thought there were lots of stories that needed exposure, allied to writing about what linked them.

# Journalistic experience of the policy

- Endless tip-offs from parents, teachers and sometimes governors about problems with the academies policy as it is being enacted on the ground.
- Stories often involve concerns about money: high salaries at the top of the organisation (sometimes as schools and their staff are struggling for cash), related party contracts.
- Concern about a lack of democracy and lack of transparency: proposals for change imposed from above, decisions being taken on schools' futures in private.
- Concerns about cronyism: a few people at the top of what can be large chains, who can be friends or relatives, in charge of decision-making.

# Structural problems of academisation: history

- Academies policy, originated in 2000, was originally designed as response to a very specific problem: urban secondary schools which had struggled for a long time.
- Set in place radical changes: sweeping powers to “sponsors”; run through individual contracts with Secretary of State, agreed privately.
- Only 203 academies, all secondary or “all-through” by time Labour left office, in 2010.
- Michael Gove arrived, putting “rocket boosters” under the scheme, using emergency powers to extend it: policy extended to successful schools, non-urban, primaries: more than 8,000 now.
- Policy became DfE’s preferred choice for all schools. Political buy-in from all three parties, arguably. And suits the policy machine’s endless craving for “reform”, whatever that might mean.
- But are its structures really right?

# Structural problems of academisation, 1

- Is the model of schools being set up through contracts agreed in private with Department for Education, rather than subject to open debate in Parliament, the right one?
- That defining arrangement, with the academy trust-DfE relationship central, seems to freeze out all other stakeholders, who appear to have few rights.
- Model of handing control of large organisations to a few people, who can be friends, subject to remote, overworked and politicised regulation from Whitehall, must be highly questionable.
- Lack of any regulation of pay, particularly evident at top end, may have set up bad incentives around setting up of some trusts.

# Structural problems of academisation, 2

- Fragmentation: market-based, quasi-commercial competition with institutional reputations central, questionable, and seems to exacerbate concerns about marginalising some pupils.
- Academies policy seems to take schools out of the democratic arena altogether.
- Perhaps if there were evidence that the policy had led to improved schools across England, the above would carry less weight. But no good evidence that it has.
- Do even heads believe it's a good idea? Major study describes education policy as "chaotic". Two thirds said inequalities between schools becoming wider as result of current government policy. 53% did not support "overall trajectory of current government policy", vs 20% who did.
- Is the policy under-researched?