

RESEARCH

FOR THE WORLD

Government policies have fragmented the UK state secondary school landscape

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Professor Anne West is Professor of Education Policy and Director of the Education Research Group at LSE. Her research focuses on education policy and early childhood education and care, in England (past and present) and in comparative perspective. She also has interests in health policy.



David Wolfe KC works as a public lawyer at Matrix Chambers. He also trains lawyers and others, particularly in education and public law. He contributes regularly to general and specialist publications and radio broadcasts on legal issues.

Academisation was designed to give schools in England more autonomy and headteachers more freedoms, with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government elected in 2010 stating that “greater autonomy to all schools” was “an absolute priority for this Government”. This push towards academies, however, has resulted in a more complex and unequal system, **Anne West’s** research reveals.

Every year, parents of children approaching secondary school age must decide which school would best suit their child. While the choice is often portrayed as a simple one between state or private school, the reality, for many, is more complex.

Anne West, Professor of Education Policy at LSE, is under no illusions about the difficulties facing parents as they navigate the system. Her latest report, co-authored with Dr David Wolfe KC of Matrix Chambers and Basma Yaghi, a researcher in the Department of Social Policy at LSE, is an exploration of the impact of government policies on state funded secondary schools in England. As a result of government policy there has been a “massive expansion” of secondary academies – eight out of ten secondary schools are now outside of local authority control – with profound consequences for secondary school state education.

While government rhetoric states that academisation gives schools freedom and independence, the reality, the report sets out, is not so positive. In fact, Professor West argues, as a result of academisation, many schools now have much less autonomy than before as they are part of multi-academy trusts and it is the trust board that makes the key decisions.

“The system is now highly fragmented with different rules for different types of schools, and more autonomy from some schools than others,” she says.



We found the process regarding the appointment of academy trustees to be opaque and not open to public scrutiny. ”

What is an academy?

Brought in by the Labour government in the early 2000s, academies were originally conceived as a way to raise education standards, particularly in disadvantaged areas where school performance was poor.

In short, “failing” local authority schools could be closed and replaced by academies “sponsored” by external trusts set up by businesses, individuals, churches or voluntary bodies, although the government would pay for the running costs.

The policy was initially focused on a small number of schools that had failed to thrive under local authority oversight, meaning that at the time of the general election in 2010, just six per cent of secondary schools in England were academies.

“This all changed in 2010, however, when then Education Secretary Michael Gove decided he wanted to enable more schools to become academies,” says Professor West. “The government’s Academies Act 2010 allowed maintained schools, for the first time, to apply to become academies. That’s when the system really started to fragment.”

School governance – a new wild west

Since 2010, Conservative governments have championed academies as the best option for schools to improve their educational offering. Academies could be operated as a single trust or as part of a “chain” managed by a multi-academy trust. But while the soundbites might sound positive, the research by Professor West and her colleagues reveals a more sombre picture, concluding that over a decade of evolving government policy has had a detrimental impact on the governance of England’s school-based education system, transforming what was a national system of schooling into a fragmented and uneven landscape.

This fragmentation, Professor West’s analysis reveals, is largely the result of policy decisions to unshackle academy trusts from the regulations that local authority-maintained state schools are required to follow. “Academy trusts are set up as private companies, and as such the legal framework in which they operate differs from that of schools maintained by local authorities,” she says.

This means that the profile of trustees on academy boards is in line with private as opposed to public interests, and because the government has allowed private trusts “almost complete flexibility” to design the constitution of their boards, they can be run by individuals with no direct knowledge of the education sector.

“Before the 2010 Act, secondary state schools across England were overwhelmingly run by school-based governing bodies and overseen by democratically elected local authorities,” explains Professor West. “Some of these schools were more

successful than others of course, but they all had to adhere to the same legislative and regulatory framework. Today, secondary schools are far more likely to be managed by a trust board. We found the process regarding the appointment of academy trustees to be opaque and not open to public scrutiny, making it harder for people outside the organisation to know how decisions are made.”

As a result of this, the researchers found no coherence between schools across England, not just in terms of overall governance, but in the decisions that flow from these boards, including admissions arrangements, the curriculum, responsibility for and use of resources – all key issues that impact on the educational experiences of school children.



All of these issues make it much harder to ensure that children across the country are able to benefit from the same level and equality of experience. ”

In charge but with no freedom

Schools in Multi-Academy Trust (MATs) are also placed in a particularly odd situation, with school leaders having less independence than they had before, continues Professor West. This is because once a school joins a MAT, it is required to follow rules set by those at the top of the “chain”. As a result, head teachers and leaders “on the ground” find themselves with less direct power to unilaterally make changes to meet the needs of their specific school. In addition, once these schools become academies, they are legally unable to leave and rejoin the local authority or join another MAT, or revert to a single academy, even if the head teacher (and the local governing body if one exists) decides that is in the school’s best interests.

“All of these issues make it much harder to ensure that children across the country are able to benefit from the same level and equality of experience that a fair and cohesive system would ensure,” Professor West says.

Greater transparency and alignment between schools is key

The system may currently be unfit for purpose, but the report sets out recommendations policymakers could take that would bring schools into alignment, meaning that schools would operate on a more level basis.

Key to this, Professor West argues, is a need for greater transparency, both in the process of setting up an academy trust and in the appointment of the governing bodies appointed to manage schools. “There needs to be far more transparency around the appointment of trustees, and it is vital that some at least should have expertise in the sector, which is not currently the case,” she says. There is a need for transparency around the decision-making process.

The report also calls for academies to align their admissions arrangements and criteria with those of local authority-maintained schools in the local area. They



should be obliged to provide clear information regarding the admission of children with special educational needs and disabilities, to help parents make preferences for their child's future school.

Finally, she states, policymakers should require all state-funded schools to publicly provide information on their use of funding, such as the pupil premium grant, and calls for a national curriculum as a way to ensure equality of opportunity for students wherever they study.

With so many academies currently dancing to their own tune, there may be no quick fix to bringing secondary state schools across the country into line. But with a refocus of policy to encourage clarity around school governance and alignment of operations between all schools, it is possible that parents of the future could find themselves navigating a more transparent and equitable system. ■

Professor Anne West was speaking to Jess Winterstein, Deputy Head of Media Relations at LSE.

"Secondary schools (academies and maintained schools) in England: issues of governance and autonomy"

is by Professor Anne West (LSE), Dr David Wolfe KC (Matrix) and Basma Yaghi (LSE).

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