

A response to the Final Report of the Leathersellers' Federation Working Party from Stop Academies in Lewisham



1 - Changing the Governing Board

Centralisation replacing local accountability

The Report of the Leathersellers' Federation Working Party (WP) pays a lot of attention to the important role of school governors. Of course, governors can play an important role in allowing the community to oversee the work of their schools. Unfortunately, what the WP proposes would significantly weaken the input of the local community.

The WP proposes a structure where the key decisions are left to a slimmed-down centralised Board of Trustees made up largely of Leathersellers' Company appointees. Parent, staff and community representation would be relegated to a second-tier of 'Local Governing Bodies' for each school.

A structure designed for an expanding Leathersellers' academy chain

The WP argues that their centralised model is required to provide strategic leadership of an expanding federation of schools, pointing out that "it is not impossible that other schools will seek to join the Leathersellers' Federation in the future. Governance of the Federation will become more and more demanding as these developments occur".

Those sentences reveal what these proposals appear to be really intended for – preparing the way for a new Multi-Academy Trust chain of Leathersellers' schools as part of the break-up of Local Authority maintained schools. Such a break-up would be damaging for Lewisham Education as a whole, not just for education within the existing Leathersellers' schools. An expansion of the Leathersellers' chain could also change the nature of the Federation. There is a risk that the Federation takes on more responsibilities at the expense of existing schools.

Separate the discussion over governance from the discussions over academisation

If there are questions to ask over the best governance arrangements for the existing schools, then the WP could – and should – have made proposals separately to making an application for an Academy Order. Instead, the two issues have been looked at together.

The WP Report itself gives examples of federations of maintained schools with a single governing body such as the Dartmoor Federation of Schools who have decided not to pursue academy status. Of course, it can be argued that what works in Devon might not be applicable in Lewisham but the WP should heed the words of that Federation's Chair of Governors: " "Why on earth should I go academy? What are the advantages? We already have a reasonable amount of freedom with the curriculum; we have good support from our local authority, which doesn't interfere. We are engaged in the budget-setting formula for Devon as a whole, the teacher unions are happy because their members' terms and conditions are unaffected, and the extra money that was given to academies has essentially disappeared." He adds that a federation can be "unpicked" if unsuccessful. By contrast, it seems almost impossible to reverse the decision to become an academy." See:

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/mar/04/schools-federations-versus-academies-government>

Multi-Academy Trusts can remove staff/parents from its Board, a maintained school can't.

The WP says that it has been advised by Stone King, the Federation's solicitors, that the best way forward is to set up a Multi-Academy Trust Board of 12 to 15 members, appointed by the Leathersellers' Company. That's perhaps not surprising as Stone King are a firm who make clear on their website that they have "supported over 400 schools nationally who have converted to academy status under the Academies Act 2010".

The WP would have been better to have had a look at what another legal expert has to say, David Wolfe QC, on his blog 'A Can of Worms': <http://davidwolfe.org.uk/wordpress/>. For example, he explains that: "Academies are (in law) 'independent schools' unlike maintained schools, in academies parents and pupils have very few direct legal rights".

One of the key differences for parents and staff between academies and maintained schools is that they must by law be represented on the Governing Board of a maintained federation. The School Governance (Federations) Regulations 2012 make clear that, for a maintained federation, the governing body of the federation must include one parent governor in respect of each school in the federation and one staff governor. See: <http://www.clerktogovernors.co.uk/governors-handbook/section-2-constitution-and-procedures/>.

Once the school becomes part of a Multi Academy Trust, that legal right is lost. The all-party Education Select Committee's recent report on academies and free schools makes the point that "On governance within academies, one parent wrote that 'parents are sidelined from all important decisions, both over whether schools convert in the first place, and over how they are run once they become academies' and the Select Committee concluded that "the voice of parents can be marginalised in some academies".

Where is the voice of parents and staff in the proposed Governance Structure?

The WP Report tries to reassure parents and staff that their voices would be heard on the local School Governing Bodies. However, it's clear that the key strategic decisions would be in the hands of the Governing Board of Trustees.

The latest "Pre-Consultation Message on Governance from the Chair of the Governing Board" sets out clearly that the overwhelming majority of the Board of Trustees would be appointed by the Leathersellers' Company. The key Trust Committees (Strategic/HR, Audit/Risk, Finance) would also have a majority appointed by the Board. Even the Chairs of the school Local Governing Bodies would be appointed by the Board of Trustees. It's hard to see how such a structure "will ensure greater accountability to the community, parents and staff" as the Chair claims it will.

In short, the new structure would be one where the key decisions would be made by appointees of the Leathersellers' Company with little opportunity for challenge by parents, staff or the local community. The Chair in his 'pre-consultation message' asks us to remember that the "Leathersellers' Company has a proud philanthropic history". However, parents, staff and the local community can't be expected to rely on philanthropy.

SAiL's response to the Leathersellers' Federation Working Party Report

2- Consultation

No advance warning given on the intention to vote to apply for an Academy Order

The WP reports that it received a number of responses from parents, staff, students and union groups. However, most respondents were under the impression that the WP report would then be published to allow informed discussion over its proposals before any decisions were taken with regard to academy conversion. Instead, parents and staff are only able to see and respond to the WP's detailed report now – as we are doing in this response.

For example, when NUT members from Prendergast Vale School submitted a series of questions to the WP, Keith Surey, the Executive Bursar, replied to thank them for their submission to the working party but to explain that “There has been no decision to apply for academy conversion. The only decision that has been made to date by the Governing Board is to set up a working party to consider issues of school improvement and governance, including academy conversion ... The working party is unable to respond to the specific questions from NUT members as at present as no decision has been made by Governing Board with regard to future governance or status of the schools. If there were any submission from the working party to GB which may lead to a proposal to apply for academy conversion the NUT members and all union groups would be welcome to submit their questions as part of the formal consultation process”.

Similarly, just days before the Governing Board met to vote in favour of applying for an Academy Order, letters were sent to parents accusing the NUT of acting prematurely in taking strike action because “The Governing Board has not yet received or considered the working party recommendations and therefore no decisions have been made”.

The Governing Board wishes the school community to trust its intentions. However, its actions in taking this key vote without clear prior warning have already led to a loss of trust. In doing so, they have already upset many in the school community, staff, parents and students, causing uncertainty at a key time for students and the school. Yet, Governors are now saying that they are being told to delay further consultation until after the General Election! So why did they rush into making the academy application now?

The Federation has not just ‘registered an interest’ in becoming an Academy Trust, it has gone as far as applying for an Academy Order, committing itself to seeking Academy status. It is now vital that Governors listen properly to the school community, with full and open consultation, before proceeding to the final decision of agreeing the Funding Agreement.

A failure to consult when proposals were still at the formative stage

The Chair has now written in his “Pre-Consultation Message on Governance” that “ the Board was advised to proceed with the application for an Academy Order before consultation. This complies with the law (Academies Act 2010 Section 5 ‘Consultation on Conversion’) and has been normal industry practice”.

Yes, it's true that, as part of their plans to accelerate academy conversion, the Coalition Government introduced the Academies Act 2010 stating that "consultation may take place before or after an Academy order, or an application for an Academy order, has been made in respect of the school". As Mr. Justice Collins commented, when ruling on a case taken by Barking and Dagenham Council against an Academy Order issued by Michael Gove for Warren School, "On the face of it that is crazy". However, it's true that is what the law says.

However, David Wolfe QC points out that there are other legal responsibilities to consider. "The law lays down some important requirements whenever a public body consults (i.e. they do not just apply to academy consultations)". These steps have NOT been followed:

- Consultation must be at a time when proposals are at a formative stage.
- The proposer must give sufficient reasons for its proposals to allow consultees to understand them and respond to them properly.
- Consulters must give sufficient time for responses to be made and considered.
- Responses must be conscientiously taken into account in finalising the decision.

The National Governors' Association (NGA) has also issued advice to schools to say that 'the NGA is of the view that consultation should take place at an early stage of the process before governing bodies have applied for academy status, and that no governing body should submit an application to the DfE unless and until they have consulted their key stakeholders (parents, pupils, staff, local authorities, or other local schools). Conversion to academy status is a significant step; it means moving accountability away from the local authority to the Secretary of State and potentially fundamentally changing the structure of the governing body. A decision on such a step should not be done without considering the views of those likely to be affected". This advice has not been followed by Governors.

See: <https://handsoffourschool.wordpress.com/academy-consultation/>

Now a full and open consultation and ballot must be conducted urgently

Academy conversion is an irreversible process with far reaching consequences for pupils, staff and the wider community. It is not a decision that should be taken lightly by a small group of governors acting without the support of key stakeholders in the school.

A full and meaningful consultation needs to begin at the earliest possible opportunity. It should include open meetings for parents and staff where there are speakers both for and against academy status. As David Wolfe points out, that consultation needs to consider not only the impact on the schools, their pupils and staff but also the wider impact on other schools and Lewisham education as a whole. Up to now, Lewisham Authority has largely resisted the spread of academies. The Leathersellers' decision has wider implications too.

The consultation should conclude with a full ballot of parents, staff and other stakeholders. The Governing Board should abide by the views of these stakeholders so that, if they reject academy status, the Funding Agreement will not be signed. Surely, if Governors are so sure of their arguments, they will be happy to put their proposals openly to the school community in this way and show that they really are willing to abide by accountability?

3 - Academy Status and School Improvement

If this is about education, why are the Governors considering Academy status at all?

In his Chair's 'pre-Consultation message', Christopher Barrow writes that "We acknowledge that academy status is "no panacea for school improvement"". So why apply for it at all?

The Chair quotes from the recently published House of Commons Education Committee's report on 'Academies and free schools' on the "complex relationship between attainment, autonomy, collaboration and accountability". However, he fails to quote the sentence that follows in the report's summary: "Current evidence does not allow us to draw conclusions on whether academies in themselves are a positive force for change". After a decade of school academisation, isn't the obvious conclusion is that the evidence just isn't there?!

The section of the Working Party report on 'school improvement' draws attention to the 'trailing edge of underachievement' apparent in the British education system, "more apparent in the secondary sector and concentrated in a minority of schools, generally serving more deprived communities". That's true but the Chair of that Commons Education Select Committee concluded from their research that "Current evidence does not prove that academies raise standards overall or for disadvantaged children".

Let's learn from Finland and reject academisation

The Working Party contrasts Britain with, for example, Finland, where "there are fewer underachieving schools". That's also true but, again, Governors need to ask why that should be the case. There are many lessons to learn from Finland and a large amount of educational research has been carried out to look into its consistently high ranking in international school comparisons. One key element is the lack of competition between schools, in contrast to the marketisation and development of academies seen in England.

As internationally renowned Finnish education expert Dr Pasi Sahlberg explains in his critique of GERM – the "global education reform movement", "the idea that more school choice will improve the system; accountability via national testing; and standardisation [are] all ideals that Finland has rejected"... Asked about academies, Dr Sahlberg dismissed the trend for increased school choice, including the English academy system, free schools in Sweden and England, and the American charter schools. He said: "When you have increasing number of academies – and my fear is the same with the Swedish free school movement – with this type of system you are probably having less collaboration between schools. When I look at charter schools in the US and for the schools in Sweden, they really do not care about anybody else, let alone that they would share that practice with other schools." See: <http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/news/the-five-lessons-we-can-learn-from-finland>

At the very least, the evidence from Finland suggests that applying for academy status would be a mistake for the Federation. Worse, if by applying for Academy status they encourage other schools in Lewisham to do the same, for fear of being 'left behind', the Leathersellers Company would be harming education across Lewisham, not improving it.

Academisation – controversial and unproven

As the WP report correctly states, “the policy of academisation and its impact on raising school standards remains, therefore, controversial and unproven”. So why pursue such an unproven policy, particularly when there is no way back to maintained status once schools have become academies?

The report includes an Appendix suggesting how freedom over the curriculum might benefit the Federation’s schools if they became academies but it concludes “there are benefits but they appear to be at the margins”. The all-party Education Select Committee has, in any case, recommended that curriculum freedoms be extended to maintained schools as well.

The report questions the impact of the Local Authority and whether it is helping sufficiently to bring about school collaboration along the lines of the successful London Challenge, making reference to an NUT report that noted that “perhaps the most effective aspect of City Challenge was that it recognised that individuals and school communities tend to thrive when they feel trusted, supported and encouraged”. See: <http://www.teachers.org.uk/node/17429>. The Local Authority may have questions to ask about how it supports schools and raises morale but, in the final analysis, at least a Local Authority is accountable to its electorate. Councillors can be voted out. However, an Academy Trust cannot be.

The WP report refers to the ‘Academies Commission’ report and its call “to ensure that an increasingly academised system is fair and equally accessible to children and young people from all backgrounds”. However, this report itself pointed out that some academy schools have been accused of manipulating admissions to improve results. In a fragmented, competitive system, isn’t this inevitable? Why encourage that fragmentation in Lewisham?

An article by Professor Stephen Gorard is listed in the references, but its findings in relation to academies and social segregation aren’t spelt out. In case the WP hasn’t read them, here they are: “It confirms earlier studies in finding no convincing evidence that Academies are any more (or less) effective than the schools they replaced or are in competition with. The prevalence of Academies in any area is strongly associated with local levels of SES segregation, and this is especially true of the more recent Converter Academies. Converter Academies, on average, take far less than their fair share of disadvantaged pupils ... This means, of course, that Academies are not helping reduce segregation (as was one of their original purposes) or increase social justice in education, and the paper concludes that homogeneous Maintained schools should be preferred for this purpose”. In short, Gorard is arguing for maintained comprehensives, not academies. Why didn’t the Working Party?

Similarly, the references point to government GCSE statistics but fail to draw out the conclusion that the Ofsted annual report for 2013/14 noted that there was no relationship between school type and performance and that the rate of improvement in KS4 attainment (5 A*-C in English and Maths) between 2010/11 and 2012/13 in LA maintained secondaries was twice that (at 2 percentage points) of converter academies (1 percentage point).

Once again, the evidence in favour of academy conversion just doesn’t exist. So why do it?

SAiL's response to the Leathersellers' Federation Working Party Report

4 - Finance

No significant advantage – as costs remain broadly the same

The financial part of the WP report contains a lot of technical information but its conclusions are clear : “Converting to a MAT should not result in a financial advantage or disadvantage to the Federation schools as pupil funding formula, staffing costs and capital allocation formula are the same and hence the overall impact is broadly neutral”.

That important conclusion backs up what, for example, the Headteacher of the Dartmoor Federation of schools quoted above has also concluded: that “the extra money that was given to academies has essentially disappeared”. In other words, while it has been suggested that the calculations applying at the outset of academisation were skewed in a way that made academy conversion financially advantageous, that's not the case today.

Academies do receive more into their budgets overall but they also have more costs to pay. The appendices to the WP report list the kind of additional services that have to be paid for out of the extra budget, services that were previously paid for by the Local Authority.

Some academies have been criticised for ‘conflicts of interest’ over how they procure such services. The National Audit Office reported that nearly half of academy trusts examined had paid public money towards the private businesses of directors, trustees and their relatives. The WP report states the Leathersellers' Company “would have no direct interest in the supply of educational or other services to the MAT”. However, the Company needs to recognise that the proposed governance structure could still raise questions about scrutiny.

As the report explains, there could be organisational advantages to academisation such as, for example, being paid budget over a school year instead of a financial year. On the other hand, there are greater responsibilities when it comes to auditing and reporting which add to the work that needs to be carried out if the schools converted to a Multi-Academy Trust.

In short, unless Governors want to start arguing otherwise, we can all agree that there is no real financial advantage to Academy conversion. So, once again, the question is, why do it?

Taking a risk as a separate Multi-Academy Trust outside the Local Authority

There might normally be no particular financial advantage or disadvantage to Academy conversion but what if things go wrong? As the WP report states, “the main difference in terms of financial management and financial accountability, governance and ownership arise from a MAT being an independent standalone organisation with full responsibility and accountability for all aspects of its activities”. That is a significant responsibility.

The WP Report points out that “A MAT is an independent body with responsibility for balancing its books without recourse to LBL or any other organisation. Consequently a MAT has to more carefully manage revenue and capital funds, ensuring appropriate reserves policies, including financial risk and investment as well as medium and long-term capital renewal and investment plans”. Yet the report also points out that many risks lie ahead!

It points out that “the overall operational financial outlook is bleak with further reductions in per pupil funding possible” and that “there was nothing in the Chancellor’s 2014 Autumn statement to suggest any improvement in the position for education or any commitment to protect the schools or education budgets up to 2019”. Is this then the time for the Federation to be setting itself up as a separate organisation, standing outside the Authority?

Building costs and the PFI – dangers that could lie ahead

The WP report acknowledges that, as a Multi-Academy Trust, the Federation would have to be ready to take on responsibilities that it could have turned to the Authority to provide, particularly in times of trouble: “As an independent public sector organisation, a MAT will need legal advisors and access to other advisors for property and other matters depending on circumstances”

For example, the report explains how “Federation schools apply for capital investment to their local authority. As a voluntary aided school, Hillyfields currently can apply for 90% grant funding towards projects and the value of this in the last few years is approximately £100,000 per annum”. Instead, “the MAT would need to apply to the Academies capital maintenance fund (ACMF) if they have urgent building repairs that they are unable to fund themselves”. As a matter of detail, the ACMF has now been renamed the CIF (“Condition Improvement Fund”), mainly set up to meet urgent safety compliance issues. With the Treasury looking for cutbacks, how much access to funds will there be if they were needed?

The Local Schools Network and the TES recently reported that, to reduce expenditure, in future “the Government will actively encourage academies to take out loans” in order to attract CIF funding. “Repayments plus interest would be made by reducing the annual amount paid to the academy”. As the LSN point out “Even if an academy is seemingly in good financial health today it might not be tomorrow – a downturn in the number of pupils following, say, a poor Ofsted would trigger a reduction in funding. But loan repayments would still have to be made and would be taken at source”. See more at:

www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk/2014/11/govt-will-encourage-academies-to-take-out-loans-to-fund-development-announcement-sneaked-out-at-half-term/

Of course, this risk of the school budget being eaten into through excessive loan repayments is exactly the risk that already faces the school thanks to PFI, the Private Finance Initiative. It’s worth noting that the Governors at Bonus Pastor School cited the PFI risks as the specific reason why they have decided not to pursue academisation at this time. The WP report recognises the risk that arises from the PFI contracts for the Vale (Babcock) and Ladywell (Bouygues). The technical side of resolving these PFI contracts on any academy transfer, as well as managing them afterwards, is alone complex. However, once again, there are also considerable financial risks involved in going alone as a MAT. The WP report points out that there is a “risk of losing PFI funding rebates on the Ladywell PFI contract”. At present, we understand that the Federation has an arrangement for a rebate on repayment costs while Ladywell School remains below full capacity. Why should the LA continue that if Governors vote to transfer to Academy status? What are the advantages for taking this risk at all?

5 - The implications for staff

Staff concerns about the effect of transfer on their employment are genuinely held

Governors are going to great lengths to contradict the advice from national unions and to say that staff conditions are not at risk if schools become academies. However, the experience of unions nationally is that, too often, such reassurances fail to be borne out.

Staff support for strike action shows that they, understandably, have more trust in their trade unions than their employers when it comes to advising them on the effect of academisation. They are also able to draw on the direct experience of staff that have moved from other academies, experience which backs up the warnings from their trade unions.

The fears of academisation mean that the proposed transfer is going to inevitably disrupt education in the short-term – and in the long-term too if the Academy transfer were agreed. That is bound to lead to staff turnover, damaging education both now and in the future.

Those concerns are based on the facts of what a change to academy status means

There is good reason for staff to fear the effects of Academy conversion. Yes, the TUPE regulations mean that terms and conditions would have, by law, to be protected on transfer and, yes, the Working Party have stated that it would propose to continue with the School Teachers Pay and Conditions Document under a Multi-Academy Trust. All that is welcome, however, it still does not give staff the security that they would have in a maintained school.

In a maintained school, the STPCD has to apply, by law. However, as the Working Party's own FAQ (2a) states, "academies have different structures and more freedom than other state schools over their finances, the curriculum, length of terms and school days and teachers' pay and conditions". What is 'guaranteed' now could easily change in the future.

Similarly, as unions know from experience, TUPE applies on transfer but some academy trusts have sought to vary conditions once a period of time following transfer has elapsed. TUPE arrangements also do not apply to new staff or when new contracts are issued after 'reorganisations'. The WP report acknowledges the concern that "in the future staff may be recruited under less favourable terms and conditions" but seeks to reassure staff that, "this is not proposed, nor is it sensible with regard to the recruitment strategy".

The problem remains that, whether 'sensible' or not, staff know that if they stay employed by a maintained school, the Governors do not have any choice to exercise the 'freedoms' that could be available to an Academy Trust employer. More to the point, what seems 'sensible' now could be very different if the Federation was facing budget difficulties. This is no idle threat. After all, it is the WP report that sets out (see above) the bleak financial outlook for schools noting, for example, that there would be "no additional funding for staff increment payments" and the probability of needing to make "cost and efficiency improvements of up to 3 to 4% per annum for the next five years". In those circumstances, is it any surprise that staff are dubious about how long 'guarantees' might last in future?

Claims that can't be backed up by the financial reality of academy status

It's unfortunate that in the latter pages of the WP report, claims are made which aren't backed up by the more measured conclusions of the earlier sections of the document. For example, the summary on Page 27 claims that "There are advantages to staff in terms of recruitment, career professional development, promotion routes, the development of employment benefits, employment security and quality of support services in a MAT. There is a greater capacity for school improvement. The capacity to manage external challenges such as adverse Ofsted judgments is enhanced with the establishment of a MAT which has more resources to effect rapid improvement". There is no evidence to back up many of these claims, particularly when the FAQs state clearly, and correctly, that "increasingly, however, there is no funding advantage to being an academy". More could perhaps be done to increase collaboration across the Federation, but that doesn't require academisation.

That same FAQ (2f) does throw out another question for staff when it states that "schools can more readily appoint new staff to work across the schools in the MAT". Doesn't that suggest that new staff might be asked to work under different arrangements after all?

In FAQ (9b), it appears that the WP do now accept what teacher unions have stated about the effect on continuity of service after being employed by an academy. The difficulty is not on transfer to the original academy but can arise if they want to leave that academy and transfer back to working in a maintained school. The maintained school does not have to automatically recognise their continuity of service, e.g. for contractual maternity rights.

Dividing education – and especially its trade unions

The NUT wrote to staff before their proposed strike action warning that "whoever wins the next General Election, public services will continue to face cuts. That means more pressure, more workload, more performance pay cuts in schools. United together, we can oppose those attacks. Divided into Academies, it becomes a lot harder to defend each other".

It seems that the WP report shares the NUT's conclusion about future budget cuts! However, the report fails to acknowledge what has been perhaps the main driver to worsening conditions in academies. Often, it is less about the formal agreements that may be in place but more about the lowering of staff confidence to object to changes that impact on their workload and morale when they become part of a separate Academy employer, perhaps with reduced access to trade union representation, paid for by the Local Authority.

The WP report says little about trade union organisation, beyond a confirmation in FAQ (9d) that trade union recognition would continue, as it must do under TUPE. Unfortunately, however, continuing trade union recognition is not the same as saying that the Trust will buy into local facilities time arrangements so that the local elected representatives released from their schools to carry out trade union duties can continue to represent them.

In short, the only way that Governors are really going to be able to reassure staff about their future rights, terms and conditions, is to end their plans for academy conversion.

6 - The implications for students and parents

Parent and student concerns about academy status are genuinely held too

The failure to properly consult with the school community before applying for an Academy Order means that the Governors have failed to give themselves a chance to understand how deep and how widespread the objections to their proposals extend in the local community.

Staff have made their feelings clear through strike action, action which is likely to continue. Parents and students are organising to show their opposition too. It's regrettable that an implication is made in the Chair's 'Pre-Consultation Message' that "our own school children were recently encouraged to hold placards" as if these young citizens were not capable of also drawing the conclusion that the academisation proposals were ones that they opposed.

The WP report doesn't directly discuss the implications for students but, given the lack of any clear evidence for the educational benefits of academisation, the Working Party will find it hard to explain how their proposals will benefit the students and families who the schools are meant to serve.

Just as some staff have had poor experiences of working at academy schools, so have some young people too. At a meeting organised by the Sedgehill Governing Body in December (before they were unjustifiably replaced by an Interim Executive Board), a number of students who had chosen to move to Sedgehill from academy schools spoke about the poor treatment they had received at their previous academy and the high turnover of staff that they had experienced as well. Students have good reasons to oppose academisation.

What guarantees are there over admissions?

As with staff terms and conditions, an academy trust has 'freedom' to determine its own admission arrangements so short-term guarantees can't necessarily be relied on in future. As stated above, the 'Academies Commission' found worrying examples where academies were being accused of using their powers to manipulate admissions to their advantage.

The WP report leaves room for concern over future admissions policy. It says that "Without knowing what the council's admissions policy will be [as a new policy is being consulted over] it is difficult to commit to it without reservation, but the Board of Governors would surely want to take it fully into account". What does 'taking into account' mean exactly? It is likely that the Local Authority will move to a 'distance-to-school' admissions policy, in place of current banding arrangements. Already, Prendergast Hilly Fields operates its own banding criteria, separate to the Authority-wide scheme. What would its new policy be?

FAQ (6j) is clearer in stating that "admission arrangements will remain the same as they are now" but FAQ (6k) just says that "the MAT Board of Trustees ... will use these powers to ensure a separate and distinct admissions policy reflecting the ethos of each school under the DfE School Admissions Code". At the very least, a lot more clarity is needed over policy.

A decision that would threaten education across the borough of Lewisham

It is not too late to draw back from those damaging proposals, although now, regrettably, the school community will be having to spend time and energy fighting a damaging academy proposal, with inevitable disruption for students, instead of concentrating on education.

It's not good enough for Governors to give the fatalistic justification of FAQ (2i) that "the majority of all secondary schools are academies. The local educational environment is changing with more and more schools in the surrounding boroughs becoming academies. The Government is pushing ahead with its intention of all schools becoming academies. There is no prospect of academies being returned to local authority control whichever party or coalition wins this year's election". That's no argument for accepting the unacceptable!

It remains the case that 80% of state funded schools in England are maintained. Just 20% of schools overall are academies – of these, while 60% of secondaries are academies, that leaves 40% still LA maintained. In Lewisham, of course, it's only Tidemill primary, St. Matthews and the Haberdashers' Aske's Federation– just a small proportion of schools.

The Coalition government sought to turn most schools into academies. That's because they wanted to put an end to elected Local Authorities having responsibility for providing services such as schools and to reduce public spending as a whole. However, that is an agenda that we think many people are increasingly opposed to. Academies have failed to stand the test of time and public scrutiny. The experience of staff, parents and students mean that the tide of public opinion is starting to turning against them.

Up to now, Lewisham Authority has largely resisted the spread of this divisive unproven scheme. Now is not the time to let them take hold. Yet, if the three Leathersellers' Schools were to convert, there is a real risk that others would follow suit. Therefore, the decisions being made by Governors are ones that have serious implications for the whole borough, as well as for the staff, parents and students of the Federation schools. That's why Stop Academies in Lewisham is determined to campaign until these proposals are withdrawn.

Stop Academies in Lewisham

February 25 2015

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