

English Schools Rush for the Exit

**Article for Education Aotearoa Magazine
September 2011**

**Peter Verstappen
Principal, Southbridge School**

On an English summer morning the Samworth Enterprise Academy shines like a beacon. Opened in 2007 it is the newest building by far among the drab council houses, litter and boarded up shops of suburban Leicester.

From a wide entrance paved in granite large doors open into a cavernous atrium, the hub of the school, rising four storeys and filled with light. One side of the atrium is the dining hall, its tables filled at the start of the day with parents chatting, drinking tea, meeting teachers. At the nearest table a boy of 11 or 12 sits dejectedly, a staff member talks quietly to him as a nervous mum watches.

Pat, the principal, dressed in a bright pink jacket and grinning widely, advances to meet us. "Welcome to Samworth," she says in a strong Midlands accent, "let's meet in the church."

The church?

The holy grail of high standards

Samworth is the brave new face of English education, a state-funded school that has been allowed to cut loose from the state system - to behave, in many ways, like a private school.

Academy schools are the flagship of the Conservative coalition government's education policy, the newest strategy in England's search for the holy grail of high standards. It seems most countries that pursue agendas of accountability and choice in education arrive at a point where they are compelled to crack open public education using vouchers, charter schools, free schools or similar. We can expect these labels to enter the educational debate in New Zealand, perhaps sooner than later.

Sponsored and converting academies

Academies come in two models in England. Samworth is a sponsored academy and originates from Tony Blair's government, when academies were set up to revitalise failing schools in deprived neighbourhoods.

Samworth Academy's sponsors are Sir David Samworth, a local industrialist whose name appears on three schools in the East Midlands, and the bishop of Leicester, whose association brings Samworth Academy into the fold of the Church of England (and explains the church).

Each sponsor contributed £2 million towards the £14 million price tag of the new school, which replaced two older schools in the neighbourhood. The sponsors have no further financial role but continue their interest through the board of governors and sponsored programmes.

In 2010 the newly-elected Conservative coalition radically altered the academy model to enable every school in England to convert to academy status if their OFSTED report (England's equivalent of ERO) is outstanding. Recently this was relaxed to 'good with some outstanding features' when Michael Gove, the Minister of Education, declared the government's goal of every school becoming an academy in the foreseeable future. OFSTED judges school quality on a wide range of indicators but test results and league tables ultimately determine a school's ranking.

Since April this year 700 schools in England have converted to academies and a further 600 have applied. Gove frames the move to academies in the language of choice, not just for parents but for principals and teachers who may wish to free themselves from the constraints of the state system. After years of heavy-handed government intervention through high stakes testing and other micro-managed reforms the talk now is about giving greater autonomy to schools and communities.

The shift is impelled by overwhelming evidence that making schools jump through ever higher hoops of accountability has not lifted student achievement or reduced inequity. Instead it has created a battered-down, compliance-driven mentality and a narrow outcomes-oriented model of success. The summer riots in London fueled debate about education's part in shaping a dispossessed and delinquent generation and discussion turns increasingly on how to harness schools towards "public value" outcomes

Too good to resist

Most principals I spoke to are eager to convert their schools to academies. They find it hard to resist the freedom of the academy model, especially when the offer is sweetened with additional funding at a time when budget cuts are forcing them to fire staff and slash programmes.

Particularly appealing is the chance to cut loose from control of local education authorities (LEAs), the second-tier government agencies that New Zealand abandoned when District Education Boards vanished at the time of Tomorrow's Schools.

The prevailing view among school leaders is that LEAs are cumbersome and inefficient, over-staffed with ex teachers and principals whose expertise is long out of date. Central government diverts funding from LEAs directly to academy schools, weakening the LEAs' capacity to deliver programmes and services. Academies may buy back services from the LEAs, but an alternative market of private providers is rapidly emerging to compete fiercely with LEAs.

In addition to financial freedoms academies can step aside from the national curriculum, introduce performance pay for teachers and receive only 'light touch' reviews from OFSTED. Academies can form federations with other local schools, taking over the management of small or failing schools under a single 'super-principal'. Academies will soon be free to enroll students from outside school zones, a crucial change for Gove, who wants "good" schools to expand at the expense of others.

Counting the cost

At the Samworth Enterprise Academy I meet Sally Freer, a parent who has recently become the school's Community Champion, connecting Samworth with the hard-to-reach families on the council estate. "I wasn't happy when they shut down the old school and built this, but now I am sold on it," she gushes. "My kids are doing well, I've got my first paid job in 11 years doing this work and this place is becoming the hub of the community."

Samworth is a powerful advertisement for the academy model. It is open 14 hours a day, 51 weeks of the year, providing adult education classes, holiday and after school programmes, and a learning environment its 900 students are obviously proud of. Teachers appear innovative, committed and are strongly supported by the principal.

It is worth remembering that Samworth is fast becoming an anomaly as the shift to converting academies gathers pace. Few poor or deprived communities will have the chances that Samworth has been given.

“Good school – bad school”

On the face of it academies simply offer many of the same freedoms New Zealand schools have enjoyed for 20 years. The difference is that academies arise from, and are burdened with, a 'good schools – bad schools' mentality that assumes improvement means having winners and losers. Academies are an extension of, not an alternative to, market-driven models of schooling that have been the dominant discourse in England for fifteen years or more.

A primary principal in Buckinghamshire admitted that turning her school into an academy hastens the creation of a two-tier system of well-funded, self-managing, high performing schools on one side and poorly performing schools, poorly funded through cash-starved LEAs on the other.

Academies offer a utopian future where the poorest schools are transformed and all others are free to pursue excellence by any means. Like high-stakes assessment it appears as a top-down and over-simplified solution to a bottom-up and highly complex issue.

If academy schools appear in the policies of New Zealand political parties we must consider their costs and benefits. The questions we must answer satisfactorily are: do we value and want to maintain a school system that promotes equity and opportunity for all? and will academies promote or inhibit that goal?

References

National College of School Leadership. (2010). Leadership for Public Value. Accessed from www.ncsl.org.uk/publications.

MacBeath, J. & Dempster, N. (Eds.). (2009). Connecting Leadership and Learning: Principles for Practice. Abingdon: Routledge.

Hopkins, D. (2002). Improving the quality of education for all. A handbook of staff development activities. 2nd edition. London: David Fulton.