



THE
WHITEHOUSE
CONSULTANCY

A POLICY AND INSIGHTS PAPER
PREPARED BY
THE WHITEHOUSE CONSULTANCY

THE YEAR AHEAD FOR ACADEMY SCHOOLS

FEBRUARY 2015

www.whitehouseconsulting.co.uk

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	2
CONTEXT	3
OVERVIEW - THE YEAR AHEAD.....	4
ACADEMY REGULATION	5
ACADEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY	5
POLITICS AND POLICY.....	6
CONCLUSION	8
THE WHITEHOUSE CONSULTANCY	9
CONTACT.....	9

CONTEXT

THIS PAPER OFFERS AN ANALYSIS OF THE POLICY ENVIRONMENT WHICH ACADEMY SCHOOLS WILL NEED TO ADAPT TO IN 2015, AND IMPLICATIONS FOLLOWING THE GENERAL ELECTION.

The Prime Minister has announced that, should the Conservatives win the next election, thousands of schools rated by Ofsted as ‘requiring improvement’ would be taken over by leading academy chains as part of “all-out war on mediocrity.” The Conservative’s proposals would mean that schools rated as requiring improvement would automatically be considered for academy status unless the existing leadership provides a “clear plan for rapid improvement”.

The detail of the policy remains to be disclosed, but the Prime Minister’s speech on 2nd February may be considered the single biggest defence of the academisation programme offered by the Government since Michael Gove MP was removed as Education Secretary in July last year. The announcement is a categorical endorsement of the Coalition Government’s academisation programme, and a direct response to recent criticisms of its schools policy. In essence, the Prime Minister is arguing that academies have raised, are raising and will continue to raise school standards.

This is in slight contrast to a report on academies and free schools published a week earlier. On 27th January, the House of Commons Education Select Committee published a seminal report on academies and free schools that provides a comprehensive assessment of the progress of the academies programme. As was widely noted in the media, the report states that is too early to say what the overall impact of the academies programme has been. However, its conclusions are more positive than the headlines suggest by deeming academies and free schools to be a “healthy” addition to the education system.

However, it is worth considering that the report did not say that academies and free schools are the cure the Prime Minister is suggesting they are. The Education Committee report goes on to pose questions about the future of the academies programme, including the much debated issue of oversight and invention and the big question over whether academies and maintained schools can coexist and thrive within the same ecosystem.

This paper will not repeat the conclusions of the Committee’s report or the content of David Cameron’s speech, but will instead anticipate the policy environment that this ecosystem will be developing in over the coming year and suggest what academies need to do - not only to survive - but to thrive.

OVERVIEW - THE YEAR AHEAD

2015 will be a pivotal year for academies and free schools. The upcoming General Election will define the course of education policy for the next four or five years, particularly the regulation of academy schools - which is the issue that divides Labour and the Conservatives on education most. Moreover, this year many of the Coalition's reforms will be embedding or are due to come into effect, which will change what and how schools teach their pupils and how both school and pupil performance is measured. Among those reforms are the Regional Schools Commissioners and Head Teacher Boards empowered to monitor academy performance, which may look to show their teeth in their first full year of operation.

Perhaps even more significantly for academy schools, this year we will see the first entirely converter academy educated pupils complete either their primary or secondary education. These are those pupils who entered primary or secondary school after their school converted to academy status in 2010/11, which will prompt even more scrutiny into the impact of the mass "academisation" of the school system on pupil attainment.

2015 will also be a defining year for the Education Funding Agency, which funds and monitors the finances of academies, as well as Ofsted, the school regulator, as both organisations will be keen to avoid the negative headlines they attracted last year. The EFA was challenged for failing to quickly address opaque financial arrangements by various academies that were uncovered by investigations. The regulation of academies' financial operations will undoubtedly be an issue that arises during the General Election, with some commentators calling for Ofsted to assess the internal operations of Academy Trusts. However, the previously sacrosanct Ofsted found itself under fire from several directions last year being "outdated" - most notably from the influential former Education Secretary Michael Gove and the National Association of Head Teachers who are calling for the inspectorate to be reformed.

2015 will pose many challenges for academies and free schools in terms of adapting to new regulatory requirements and new academic accountability measures; dealing with political and resources challenges; as well as withstanding severe examination from entrenched interests and ideologues who are keen to see the very concept of school autonomy fail.

ACADEMY REGULATION

The regulation of academy schools has, and will continue to be, a hot topic in the education sector since the massive expansion of the academies programme by the Coalition Government. The Education Committee's report into academies and free schools draws out regulation as the main issue that the Coalition Government has not satisfactorily addressed.

Throughout the history of academies programme, the autonomy of academies from local authorities has posed a question as to how academies would be monitored both academically but also operationally. Reluctant to put any constraints that may slow the academisation of the school system, the Government's belated answer has been to appoint eight Regional Schools Commissioners to monitor the performance of the academies in their area. The Regional Schools Commissioners themselves report to elected Head Teacher Boards in their respective areas, although their role also includes encouraging schools to convert to academies. Critics have said that the Commissioners are too few and too focused on expanding the academy programme rather than monitoring it.

Labour has proposed substantially increasing academy oversight by introducing 150 Directors of School Standards to oversee the education system locally if they form the next Government. The sheer number of Directors suggests that they would be more interventionist and pose a far more robust oversight system than currently exists. However, there are fears that they would curb innovation by schools, with Labour's insistence that all teachers must have Qualified Teacher Status being suggestive of an agenda that looks to constrain variation and homogenise the education system. It is also expected that Directors would be able to inspect the internal operations of academy trusts, with increasing calls for greater scrutiny of their financial management. Financial regulation is one area that we anticipate the academies oversight system to be strengthened whoever forms the next Government, with more financial transparency from Trusts the likely minimum reform.

ACADEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY

The academic standards that hold schools to account are also due to change this year. The most influential of these changes are the reforms to school accountability measures, which some schools may opt into this September but all schools must adhere to from September 2016. Secondary schools will be ranked on a combination of overall attainment in 8 core subjects, with mathematics and English double weighted, and the progress of pupils from entering the school to completing their GCSEs at 16. The new accountability measures have been designed to incentivise schools to ensure they focus on improving

the performance of all pupils regardless of their expected attainment - rather than directing resources at the C-D GCSE grade borderline as the current school league table ranking encourages.

Primary schools will also be subject to new accountability measures, with pupil progress measured from a controversial baseline on school entry at year 1 (aged 4 to 5) to leaving the school at year 6 (aged 10 to 11). However, at primary level, the long-used but much criticised National Curriculum levels will be abolished and schools will be able to adopt their own assessment frameworks. Under current plans, the only nationally consistent primary schools assessments will be the baselines assessment and end of Key Stage 2 assessment.

A new National Curriculum is also being taught this year for pupil years 1, 3, 4 and 5, and from September for years 2 and 6 (end of Key Stage 1 and 2 respectively). Primaries will also be subject to a floor standard of ensuring 85% of their pupils reach an expected level from this year, subject to investigation from the schools inspectorate or even intervention from a Regional School Commissioner if they fail to meet this target. This will be a year of adaption for both primaries and secondaries. Reforms to the Key Stage 3 curriculum for years 7, 8 and 9 (aged 11-14) came into force last September, and reforms to the Key Stage 4 curriculum (aged 14-16) - GCSE level - will be introduced in phases from September 2015, with Key Stage 4 science the last to be rolled out in September 2017.

Many schools will spend 2015 in a state of flux, having to balance ensuring their pupils perform as well as possible using the now old pupil assessment arrangements while preparing for the new system that will be largely in place from September 2016. The principle of the new system will be the assessment of pupil progress from school entry to leaving school, which should theoretically favour all-through schools that are able to ensure a consistency of provision for pupils who need more support and identify more able pupils that can be pushed further. Theoretically, the autonomous nature of academy schools should make them well disposed to adapting to the new assessment system by tilting their teaching focus either towards accelerating pupils progress or overall pupil attainment. However, the political and policy environment over the next few years will likely add to the pressure of expectation for academy schools to succeed.

POLITICS AND POLICY

2015 will be a year of flux in many ways for academy schools, especially innovative schools that have taken full advantage of their autonomy from local authorities to experiment with new educational methods. May's General Election has the potential to provide something of a watershed moment for the so-called "academisation" of the schools system, while no major party outright opposes academy

schools, we should expect to see a different attitude to academies and free schools should the next Government be Labour-led rather than Conservative-led. As discussed, Labour are looking to introduce far stronger oversight measures to academy schools that are likely to severely curb their expansion. Labour also seem set to block the opening of any new free schools, although they are expected to allow those that are currently open to remain so.

Labour, despite introducing the concept of academy schools, have been critical of the sheer speed and scale of the Coalition's academisation programme. Labour's main critique has been that the programme has been pursued for ideological purposes by the Conservatives, at the expense of practicality or consistency, to eradicate local authority influence over education. Labour argue that schools are being over-incentivised or even forced to covert to academy status, while that too many academies are being mis-managed due to too little oversight. In making this attack, Labour has emphasised the extent to which they will clamp down on academies and innovation will inevitably suffer under a more dynamic oversight system.

There is an ideological element to Labour's critique. Promoting equality of access and the equality of opportunity is in the DNA of the Labour Party, which has manifested in pursuing policies that streamline services - including in education. The school autonomy agenda rubs against this narrative of standardising services, which has been a key part of Labour Leader Ed Milliband's vision for the UK. Under a Labour-led Government, we can expect an end to this age of innovation in education and a sharp clamp down from any schools that veer from the "normal" - with the insistence that all teachers should have Qualified Teacher Status arguably symbolic of this argument.

In contrast to this, a Conservative led Government is far more likely to be open to educational innovation. However, without the energetic Michael Gove at the helm as Education Secretary, the party is less likely to be interested in prioritising educational innovation in Government. Michael Gove's removal in favour of the more reserved but less provocative Nicky Morgan has already allowed politicians on the right of the Party to re-vocalise the case for grammar schools, which had been silenced under Gove. This in itself is evident of a vacuum of rhetoric on education policy that has emerged since Gove's departure, until the Prime Minister's 2nd February speech. After years of upheaval and struggle the Conservatives appear to have lost the appetite to pursue further bold changes to the system that Gove transformed. Gove's reforms were not without controversy within the ranks of the Conservative Party either, as many have voiced concerns over his centralisation of control and his endorsement of the corporatist elements of the education market - with a handful of academy chains looking to dominate the system while initially only being accountable to the Education Secretary (before the introduction of Regional School Commissioners).

Whoever forms the next Government, it is likely to push for academy trust financial transparency to a far greater extent than this Government has. The nature of the polls at present also means that the Liberal Democrats will have a strong influence over the next Government, either forming part of it in Coalition or perhaps propping up a minority Government or one with a small majority. The Liberal Democrats have looked to place themselves in a middle ground between the Conservative's open market and Labour's regulatory instincts by insisting on a stronger middle tier of academy accountability, but suggesting that Labour's plans go too far. The Liberal Democrats will make education a major theme of their election campaign and seem to be starting to set the terms of debate over the policy area. Seeing a Liberal Democrat receive a major ministerial position in the Department for Education is probably the safest bet we could make ahead of this unpredictable election.

CONCLUSION

The coming year will be a defining year for the academies programme, not simply because of the reforms to school accountability and oversight, or because of the possibility of a change of Government after the next election, but because in 2015 autonomous schools will need to prove to their critics that they do make a substantial difference to the educational outcomes. Last year the "honeymoon period" for academy schools that made allowances for inevitable issues with rapidly rolling out the academies programme clearly ended.

Financial transgressions by some Academy Trusts, the "Trojan Horse" scandal in Birmingham and a catalogue of alleged or evident conflict of interests between academy leaders and affiliated private companies frequently covered the pages of the education trade press - and too often the national press. The academic results of academy schools have been analysed and over-analysed to the point where conclusions on the impact of the school autonomy agenda are hard to ascertain - as the Education Committee report proved. There is also the fact that the most outspoken defender of the academies programme, Michael Gove, was moved out of his Education Secretary post and his successor Nicky Morgan has been deliberately far more tepid in the warmth of her embrace for the programme for fear of being associated with the aforementioned headlines.

Academy trusts, chains and clusters now more than ever must do more to defend their own record, create positive headlines by emphasising where they have achieved good results and engage with leaders of the next Government to ensure they stand up for schools against their critics when difficulties emerge. Academies will also need to work with the next Government, not against it, to create a policy environment that allows the 4,200 plus academies to bloom.

THE WHITEHOUSE CONSULTANCY

THE WHITEHOUSE CONSULTANCY HAS EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE OF SUPPORTING CLIENTS IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR, INCLUDING WORKING WITH SCHOOL CHAINS AND EDUCATION SERVICE PROVIDERS. WE ALSO, AS PART OF OUR CORPORATE & SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, WORK CLOSELY WITH A SCHOOL IN LAMBETH TO SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE THEIR PUPILS ENGAGEMENT WITH CURRENT AFFAIRS AND POLITICS.

Our team of more than 20 consultants provide political communications, stakeholder engagement, media relations, crisis management, research and intelligence gathering.

Our approach is proactive, drawing across our experience and expertise and allowing for coordinated and integrated service provision.

Our clients benefit from our research and intelligence gathering, providing insights and opportunities to meet organisational objectives via engagement in policy development and with the national and specialist news agenda.

CONTACT

For further information on this paper or about other services that Whitehouse can provide please contact:

Oliver Cardinali, Consultant - 020 7463 0688 / oliver.cardinali@whitehouseconsulting.co.uk