

# Cap academy heads' salaries

Stephen Lambert

**T**he rollout of academies has been a key feature of the North's educational landscape. Over half of the region's secondary schools are academies with head teachers, or CEOs as they like to be called, holding the purse strings.

But academies are not a new phenomenon. It was a Labour government policy in 2008 to address the problem of under-achievement in urban schools. The city academy was a new type of secondary school designed to replace failing comprehensives. One of the first was set up in Scotswood, Newcastle to replace the ailing Westgate College with good GCSE pass rates below nine per cent.

Emulating the American Charter School initiative, the thinking was that they would boost education standards across the country by widening diversity and parental choice by promoting competition among providers. With their bigger intake of 'free school meals' the new academies would shed the culture of failure and low aspirations held by working-class neighbourhoods. Cut loose from the 'dead hand of local government', academies were to be funded by the state and run by business, faiths, charities and universities.

While Labour saw them as a form of 'social engineering' to tackle failing schools and class-based disadvantage, the Coalition

/ Conservative government from 2010 has used them as a vehicle to effect system-wide structural change. Like Labour, the Coalition saw narrowing the achievement gap as key. With generous cash inducements the aim was for academy status to be the norm in all state schools across England and Wales.

Academies are free from council control and have the freedom to set their own staff pay and conditions - though most do pay the going rate for teachers in their employ. For Labour, academies were only to be based in deprived communities; for the Conservatives they were to replace all schools - both failing and successful.

The number of academies has grown significantly in the last seven years. By 2012 there were 1,000 academies. By 2017 over half of secondary schools got academy status. Many schools have joined academy 'chains' or 'trusts' since the re-election of the Conservative government in 2015 and 2017.

Based on an ideology of neo-liberalism and the free market the government drive to create more academies was to reduce bureaucratic control and give head teachers the power to make decisions and raise educational standards. Advocates of this approach were keen to see the return of traditional educational values, the importance of school uniforms, setting students by ability, a knowledge-based curriculum and the promotion of 'British values'. For Conservative ministers they were to be engines of social mobility.

Some academies in our region have been successful in dramatically improving GCSE results at grades A\* to C. The inner-city Excelsior academy in the west end and the St Mary's in the east end of Newcastle are notable examples, with hundreds of students from white and BME working-class backgrounds opting for university at 18, while Gosforth academy located in a wealthy suburb continues to thrive. The best academy 'chains' have transformed 'sink' comprehensives into successful schools which parents try hard to get their kids into. Others are less successful, such as Kenton, which was downgraded by Ofsted in 2015 from 'outstanding' to 'requiring improvement'.

Yet the central goal of academies must be the promotion of excellence. In the last year revelations about academy heads' pay have damaged parental trust and undermined confidence in a system designed to raise standards.

One CEO of an academy trust is paid £420k, more than double the salary of the prime minister. Seven earn between £200k and £300k. On Tyneside serious ministerial questions have been asked about why a retired head was paid a salary of more than £140k as executive head of a MAT of just two schools - both of which were recently assessed as 'requiring improvement'.

Of course high performance warrants adequate payment. But these salaries aren't appropriate in a public service profession whose whole ethos is to improve the education and life chances of our children, not to make as much dough as possible for administrators. Let's not forget this is tax-payers money - our money!

With many teachers struggling on salaries of less than £28k a year and some schools getting parents (many on low to middle incomes) to fork out for books or

even toilet paper, there's no reason to pay these people ten times as much as those who deliver lessons in our classrooms - often in challenging circumstances. And there's no rationale whatsoever for hiring a battalion of outside consultants on eye-watering daily fees to tell them what's gone wrong.

Academies can't jeopardise the electorate's trust by squandering public money on top salaries. Academies are here to stay. Government ministers must set a cap on academy heads' pay. No CEO should be paid more than the PM - £152k a year. To do otherwise would be a disaster for the policy consensus to improve state-funded education both in the north of England and elsewhere. Our national system of state education must be for the many and not just the few.

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