

Academies and a change of plan

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The government's decision on Friday not to press ahead with full academisation in the way originally proposed is almost certainly a result of pressure from a number of Conservative MPs and Conservative Local Authorities. With a majority of just 12 seats, the government only has to lose the support of a small number of Conservative MPs to be at risk of losing a vote in the House of Commons

However, the wording of the announcement still allows for a mass academisation agenda, and Nicky Morgan has this weekend reiterated her wish for all schools to become academies.

The new plan is to

- a) Encourage schools to convert willingly
- b) Force schools to become an academy if
 - a. Their standards are too low (no specific measure has been given yet, though inadequate schools and coasting schools are identified in the Education and Adoption Act)
 - b. The LA has so few schools left that its capacity is insufficient to provide for the few remaining non-academies

So the appetite for full academisation is still there. The route is open to force academy status on large numbers of schools, with the new requirements above and particularly with the new coasting school status that is to be introduced this Autumn, added to the existing inadequate judgement from Ofsted.

The most persuasive argument for mass academisation emerged in the government's announcement on Friday.

This is not about educational standards (there is too much conflicting evidence about whether or not academy status does make a difference to student outcomes and destinations); this is about a pragmatic need in the face of an ideologically driven policy: the government has invested so heavily in the academies policy and has so significantly developed the monitoring and intervention capacity of the Regional Schools Commissioners, that LAs are losing, conversely, their own funding, expertise and capacity. As more and more schools either choose to, or are forced to, become an academy, the LA will be left with only a few outliers. We will reach a tipping point and when we do, the solution is to force all schools to stop being dependent on a Local Authority and to become an academy, ideally as part of a MAT.

All this means that there is a desperate need to identify more academy sponsors – established, successful, robust system leaders who can assume responsibility for transforming the standards in underperforming schools.

In the past, academy sponsors originally came from the world of business: individual philanthropists who brought new energy, vigour and high standards – and £2 million – to vulnerable schools and communities; in time, academy sponsorship was extended to local employers, charitable foundations, universities, FE colleges, sixth form colleges and, now most common of all, outstanding schools. This last group is the government's 'schools-led self-improving system' in action: high performing schools building Multi Academy Trusts and deploying their expertise and leadership beyond their own boundaries. But there are not enough of them, certainly not enough committing to the great responsibility – and risk.

This is where Sixth Form Colleges may choose to be, or may find themselves under pressure to be. As centres of excellence, both in the business of education and in 16-19 pedagogy and performance, they have a great deal to bring to the self-improving system and the RSCs will certainly be interested to listen to SFCs exploring the sponsor possibilities. The SFCA is working on behalf of colleges to help open effective channels of communication.

Recent history would suggest that SFCs can make a big difference across the sectors and phases. Not just at 16-19. Their acumen, back-office expertise and capacity, strong leadership, and relentless focus on standards and outcomes, mean they are well-placed to take on, if they choose to do so, other more fragile colleges, but also infant schools, primary schools, 11-16 schools, schools with a sixth form (of course) and AP and special schools.

The additional capacity required to deliver on this policy can be generated and funded through top-slicing the academy budget (in the region of 3%), and addressing financial inefficiencies in the sponsored academy. This allows the MAT to appoint the right people with the right skills for the task in hand.

The Sixth Form Colleges' Association is working with colleges to ensure they have accurate and objective information to decide whether or not to become an academy, whether to establish a stand-alone or a multi academy trust, whether or not to be an academy sponsor, whether or not to bring in primary, secondary or other schools. The different context and priorities of each college mean that this is a set of considerations being addressed by each individual college and SFCA will work with each one – and with, DfE, EFA and the Treasury – to ensure that the right information is available and the very best terms are available.

And of course, SFCA will continue to serve all colleges, whether they become academies or not.