

Academies Old and New Explained

The key questions about academies - old and new - explained.

What is an academy?

Academies are independent, state-funded schools, which receive their funding directly from central government, rather than through a local authority.

Although the day-to-day running of the school remains with the head teacher or principal, they are overseen by individual charitable bodies called academy trusts and may be part of an academy chain.

These trusts provide advice, support and expertise.

They have more freedom than other state schools over their finances and curriculum, and do not need to follow national pay and conditions for teachers.

How many are there?

As of March 2016, there are 5,170 academies open in England. And there are hundreds more in the pipeline.

The number has grown dramatically under the coalition government, from 203 in May 2010.

Now over half of all secondaries in England are academies.

Are academies all about improving failing schools?

Not any more. The policy, which originated under Labour, aimed to improve struggling schools, primarily in deprived areas.

And this continues under the sponsored-academy model, where failing schools are taken over and run by an academy trust, usually under a new principal and governing body.

But this has been changed radically and accelerated by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition.

Now all schools - primary as well as secondary - have been invited to convert to academy status, but priority has been given to those deemed by education watchdog Ofsted to be "outstanding" or "performing well".

These are known as converter academies and are, in part, about spreading good practice from the best schools.

The government argues academies drive up standards by putting more power in the hands of head teachers and cutting bureaucracy.

It says they have been shown to improve twice as fast as other state schools. Others dispute that.

How do schools benefit from becoming academies?

On top of the £25,000 towards conversion costs from the Department for Education, academies can potentially top up their budget by as much as 10%.

This is because on top of the regular per pupil funding, it gets money that would previously have been held back by the local authority to provide services such as special needs support.

If the school is able to buy in the services it needs more cheaply, or has less need of those services, it can benefit financially from becoming an academy. Now large academy chains run schools creating economies of scale themselves.

More freedom over staff pay can mean they make savings or attract and retain good teachers by paying more, while control over the length of the school day can allow them to teach more lessons.

What do critics say?

Teaching unions say "academisation", as it is known, is being used as a way of privatising the school system, because private providers run large "chains" of schools and the structure sidesteps the influence of the local authority.

Labour argued the changes would benefit more privileged neighbourhoods and that the best schools would suck in the best teachers and resources, leaving those left under local authority control regarded as second best.

Local councils have also lost money to provide support services for schools.

Teachers have held strikes against conversions in many schools, angry over new terms and conditions and optouts from national pay agreements.

How accountable are academies?

Like other schools, they are subject to inspections by Ofsted. However, a substantial chunk of new converters will be outstanding schools - which are no longer be subject to routine inspections under separate changes made to the education inspection regime.

The DfE publishes their exam results and other data from academies as it does for other schools, and they feature in school league tables.

Opponents of the policy argue they are less accountable than other state schools, because they are not overseen by the elected local authority leaders.

How do schools convert voluntarily into academies?

Schools submit their application to the DfE once they have a positive vote for the change from their governing body.

Once the application is approved, the secretary of state issues an academy order and a trust is then set up which in effect has a contract to run the academy for the government.

The school then registers the academy trust with Companies House and agrees leasing arrangements for school buildings and land. The final stage is the signing of a funding agreement with the secretary of state.

Schools must hold some form of consultation before the funding agreement is signed. But some teachers' unions have criticised the fact that it has been left up to the school to decide who is consulted, and when and how this is done.

The school does not need the permission of the local authority to convert.

And in sponsored academies?

Under the new plans, a sponsored academy solution will be assumed for all schools judged inadequate by Ofsted.

For underperforming schools, based on the missing of a series of benchmarks yet to be set out, regional schools commissioners will be given powers to intervene on behalf of the secretary of state.

For stagnating schools, which meet the government's future definition of coasting, additional support will be identified by the regional schools commissioner.

They will also be able to impose academisation on these schools, bringing in new leadership where it is needed.

However, the government says, schools will given the time to improve if they have the capacity to do so and a credible plan.