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School Business: the Academies Programme

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ABSTRACT

Internationally there is growing private involvement in the delivery of state-funded education which raises concerns about public accountability of taxpayers' money. English schools are part of this process of change, which is driven by central government and is intended to reduce the power of Local Government (LG) over education. This paper focuses on the recent Academies programme which forms part of this agenda for change. While its objective has varied over time, essentially it fragments the organisation and funding of and control over state-funded schools.

As the potentially significant impacts on education may not be clear to stakeholders, we take a political economy perspective, drawing on a blend of agency and stakeholder theory to examine these changes and their impact on public accountability. The purpose of this paper is (i) to identify the scale of the programme and the changes it brings to the organisation of education and (ii) to investigate the resulting impacts on public accountability for revenue expenditure on schools.

The research methods include documentary analysis of information in the public domain or available through Freedom of Information requests. In particular we have used information made available in speeches and by follow up discussions with participants at the Academies Show, a promotional conference for the programme.

The paper shows that as schools have become businesses, monitoring, governance and accountability processes have changed. The role of key individuals has become substantially redefined as head teachers become accounting officers directly responsible to parliament and school governors become non-executive directors. The loss of control over revenue spending in schools by LG means that the traditionally close and personalised monitoring of schools has disappeared. Possible outcomes include loss of public accountability, a downgrading of governance expertise, schools with serious deficits, as has already become evident in the health sector where hospitals gained similar autonomy, or even scandal. But most significantly these reforms pave the way for more private sector involvement in education.

Keywords: public accountability, agency and stakeholder theory, Academies, governance