

# FIONA MILLAR

# CHAIN REACTION

THE RECENT REPORT REVEALING WORRYING INADEQUACIES IN MANY AET SCHOOLS REALLY SHOULDN'T HAVE COME AS A SURPRISE, ARGUES FIONA MILLAR...

Over the summer I spent time reading up on post war education history. It is always good to take a long view, to see what has changed and what has stayed the same. There isn't much new about some of the arguments we hear today about curriculum, teaching and qualifications. The most radical transformation is in the way many of our local schools are organised.

Until the late 1980s the vast majority of schools in England were 'maintained'. That doesn't mean they were all local authority schools. Promoters of recent reforms tend to ignore the diversity that has always existed in the English school system, largely because of the role of the churches, but most schools were funded through the local authority and regulated by legislation developed over the previous 40 years.

All that changed with the advent of the Conservative's City Technology Colleges in the late 80s, followed by the Labour academies, and now the coalition's free schools. These are all 'independent' state schools, regulated only by their funding agreements – commercial contracts between the sponsors and the secretary of state. By the next election around a quarter of English schools will be overseen this way, held to account by central government, each with a subtly different legal and governance structure depending on how and when it was set up.

Yet the implications of this arrangement are only just dawning on many people. Who has responsibility for local oversight as local authority power diminishes? What happens when things go wrong? Can the Secretary of State realistically take overall responsibility for thousands of schools? Who stands between the school and Ofsted?

At the start of the coalition government, it was mooted by some reformers that these questions would be resolved by the emergence of 'academy chains'. These chains would become pseudo local authorities raking off a percentage of the schools' budgets and running central services. In reality certain of these chains now call the shots on issues like curriculum, uniform, ethos and culture in a way many authorities have never done, which is ironic when you think about how much 'autonomy' has been trumpeted in relation to this particular reform.

And some academies are almost literally "in chains". They don't exist as legal entities in their own right, they have no means to leave the chain if they are not happy; they are simply subsidiaries of the main academy trust which holds a 'master' funding agreement with the Secretary of State.

But now a huge hole has been blown in the assumption that this sort of corporate sponsorship model would automatically deliver a better service than the local authorities. Technically Ofsted doesn't have the power to inspect the chains



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themselves, so HMCI Sir Michael Wilshaw has cannily arranged matters so that a series of academies in one chain can be inspected and reported on together. The performance of some of these chains has been found wanting and the most critical recent report – about the Academies Enterprise Trust – was published at the start of this term.

Inspections of twelve AET schools were accompanied by a survey of academy leaders across the chain. Inspectors said that too many of its schools were failing to make sufficient improvement or narrow the achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children. Respondents to the survey talked about the ruling trust growing too quickly, about leaders feeling isolated and lacking confidence in the chain's ability to provide the support they needed.

And when you look at the rate of AET's expansion it's not hard to see why that might be the case. In 2009 the chain had nine schools; by 2013 it had 77. This didn't happen by chance. It was orchestrated by the DFE, whose obsession with expediting the academisation of the nation took precedence over sound educational judgement.

Of course there are some excellent academy chains that (like AET) run schools around the country rather than in one geographical area. There are also some tiny ones, often comprising a handful of local schools whose leaders openly admit they chose this route in preference to getting swallowed up by one of the bigger giants of the new schools market.

But a model for the future of English education it emphatically isn't. The independent state school sector is almost certainly here to stay, as conversion of so many schools back into the maintained sector would be a costly and time-consuming process.

But the way schools are organised and held to account locally needs careful thought. The chains, many of which perform less well than the local authorities they were supposed to replace, need to be viewed more sceptically and rapid expansion treated with caution. Such an arrangement might work for a group of supermarkets. It has yet to be proven beyond doubt to be suitable for schools.

