

EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION:

THE LAUNCH OF THE CITY OF LONDON'S ACADEMIES

Read by Catherine McGuinness

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To the extent that I had—before joining this Association—considered the question “What is history?” I had always assumed it was the study of the distant past and usually of people who were dead.

I was therefore surprised when our President, in asking me to make my contribution to our researches, suggested that in place of the history of Castle Baynard—the City’s premier ward—or one of the other “ancient” subjects I had thought of I cover the founding of the City’s three academies, in Southwark, Islington and Hackney; the youngest members of the City’s educational family.

It would be useful, he suggested, to capture this part of the City’s history while we could still remember the “conversations in the corridors” as this new venture was brought about.

With some justice. The establishment of these academies represents arguably the most fundamental change in the City’s educational offer in some generations. And after all, as John W Gardner, US administrator, once said:

“History never looks like history when you are living through it.”

Before I turn, then, to this subject: two disclaimers. First, since some of those who participated in those conversations are actually round this table, apologies if I misrepresent you. You will have your opportunity over lunch to correct me. Secondly, while I have tried to be impartial, I have recently completed my term as chair of the Hackney governors and am therefore having to suppress a certain natural bias.

Fellow historians will remember the rise of “New Labour” in the mid 90s, and Tony Blair’s rousing speech to the Labour Party conference in October 1996, just months before sweeping to power, when he declared:

“Ask me my three main priorities for government, and I tell you: education, education, education.”

Accordingly, when Labour won the election in May 1997, its very first White Paper, “Excellence in Schools”, set out its aims and aspirations in almost evangelical terms, seeking support for a “crusade” for higher standards.

Initiatives rapidly followed: prescriptive literacy and numeracy strategies for primary schools, telling teachers exactly how to conduct their classes; education action zones, tasking local consortia with raising money from private enterprise to help raise standards; an “Excellence in Cities” programme designed to raise standards in urban schools through support for gifted and talented pupils; and a host of others.

But standards did not rise fast or high enough, and in March 2000 the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, announced plans to transform secondary education. At their heart these plans set out a radical approach for some of the most challenging areas: a new type of school, “city academies”.

To quote:

“...These academies, to replace seriously failing schools, will be built and managed by partnerships involving the Government, voluntary, church and business sponsors. They will offer a real change and improvements in pupil performance, for example through innovative approaches to management, governance, teaching and the curriculum, including a specialist focus in at least one curriculum area. They will also be committed to working with and learning from other local schools.”

Quite what the sponsors were expected to do, besides inject 20% of the capital costs and appoint a majority of the governors, was not made clear, either in this speech or the more detailed guidance which followed; but as with the previous Conservative administration and its “city technology colleges”, on which these were modelled, it was plain that government considered private sector involvement and specialism “a Good Thing”.

I should make clear at this point that these academies were not the same thing at all as the new academies which the current administration, under Education Secretary Michael Gove, has introduced. New-style academies, rapidly becoming the most common form of secondary school in the country, are simply normal schools independent of local authority control. Many were before conversion already ranked as “good” or “outstanding” by OFSTED. New Labour’s sponsored academies, in contrast, were intended to replace the most challenging of schools in the most deprived and difficult areas. As the Sunday Times put it, they were “Labour’s great experiment to rescue some of the country’s worst inner-city sink schools.” It is important to remember that as we assess the City’s new venture, and the scale of what it has taken on.

This policy did not find universal support. A vigorous campaign was launched against, largely from the political left, reaching a crescendo in 2005, when the major teaching unions joined MPs on the Labour-controlled Commons Select Committee in calling for halt to the programme.

“Millionaire capitalists should keep their hands off our state education system”, Ken Muller, a teacher from Islington (and a name I will come back to), told the NUT conference in March 2005. He received a standing ovation. The NUT general secretary warned the government that they would be very foolish if they ignored the depth of opposition to academies: “The whole of the teaching profession—500,000 teachers— is opposed to the programme.” And a campaigning body linking unions, pupils, parents, teachers, councillors and MPs, the Anti Academies Alliance, was launched, and demonstrations regularly held outside establishments planning to convert.

In response some prospective sponsors started peeling off; the “Times” of 29 March 2005 reported that Jasper Conran, the designer, and Sir Peter Vardy, a millionaire car dealer and evangelical Christian, had pulled out of plans to sponsor academies in Waltham Forest and Doncaster respectively after local protests.

But this controversy was a long way in the future one spring day in March 2000, shortly after the Blunkett speech, when the then chairman of the Policy & Resources Committee, Judith Mayhew, set off with Town Clerk Tom Simmons and Director of Public Relations Tony Halmos to 10 Downing Street to meet with the Prime Minister’s special advisor Andrew Adonis and Sir Cyril Taylor to discuss the possibility of the City of London Corporation becoming one of the initial sponsors.

They were armed with a City education department briefing note, suggesting that the City avoid “fresh starts”—failing schools reopened in a new guise—only engage where the home Local Education Authority was supportive; and look seriously at establishing a new school in partnership.

The meeting was very positive; the team returned determined to take this forward.

Why should the City want to become involved?

The paper which went to Policy & Resources following the meeting outlined the thinking. The City had (as it still does) a substantial commitment to private secondary education, putting millions in aggregate in each year into the three City schools—City of London School, City of London School for Girls and the City of London Freeman’s School—and King Edward’s School Witley in particular (as an aside, it is always a matter of surprise to me that despite the profile which the City connection holds at Christ’s Hospital the City’s contribution there is actually quite small). There would be substantial merit, the paper suggested, in demonstrating greater commitment to educational assistance in the public sector, especially in one of the City’s neighbouring boroughs. Additionally the City had no maintained secondary school, and a well-organised group of parents with school-age children had formed in the north of the City with suitable secondary schooling high on their agenda.

Plus of course (though not explicit) must have been the consideration that this was one of the current government's key policies. To support it could earn credit in the government's eyes.

However, and to my mind strangely, no consideration seems to have been given to the long-term support which would be needed from the City to make such an academy—a school which would of its very nature be set up in difficult and challenging circumstances—a long-term success.

Following the Policy & Resources meeting, a letter was sent on 4 July 2000 to the Department of Education and Employment confirming the Corporation's agreement in principle to becoming a sponsor, and its intention to open discussions with Hackney and Southwark.

The papers reveal that Islington had also been considered; with its proximity to the City it was a natural choice. But this was rapidly dismissed: a meeting with the Council had ascertained that this initiative "...was not a priority for them in terms of links with the City through the Corporation".

Attention then focussed on which borough to select. There were pros and cons to each. But, importantly, both had strong local support, with parents agitating for new schools, borough leaders in favour and cross-party support.

After careful analysis, the choice settled on Southwark, despite the greater distance, and this was reflected in a detailed paper to the Education Committee on 6 November 2000, setting out the next steps needed to bring the project to fruition. The paper stated that though there would be no requirement for sponsors to provide a contribution to running costs it would be sensible to reserve the Corporation's position on supplementing these on a discretionary basis.

Minutes for the November meeting indicate a vigorous discussion. The committee approved the plan but insisted—by a vote—to limit the City's financial contribution to £2 million rather than the government's expected 20%. The Town Clerk then had to go cap in hand to government to explain this. A file note records him "...approaching the Department ... with some embarrassment". The Department was not amused. But, after a battle, the Corporation won the day (just as well, as the project eventually cost some £33.7 million to realise).

The Education Committee decision was confirmed by Court of Common Council on 4 January 2001, and the City's sponsorship was announced in March by Schools Standards Minister Estelle Morris. The academy would be one of the first to have a business and enterprise specialism.

Work on establishing the academy then began in earnest. This was a major undertaking. Besides the intricacies of planning and building a new school,

to establish an academy a sponsor needed to decide on constitution and governance; plan a detailed curriculum; agree admissions criteria, which in the City's case needed to guarantee a number of places for City children; recruit a team of staff; and agree funding arrangements with the government, who wanted a say in all these areas.

And bear in mind that as "early adopters" the Corporation went into this while the programme was still finding its feet.

Perhaps the most difficult issue was the site. A number were considered, and the choice fell on Paterson Park, an underused open space in Bermondsey on a direct bus route from Liverpool Street, and therefore easily accessible by City residents.

Paterson Park was not, however, an easy site. Formerly railway sidings of the Bricklayers' Arms station that had predated the rail terminus at London Bridge, it was an awkward parcel of land, split into two by a road viaduct. Part included allotments run by the Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Horticultural Society, and the rest was a dreary place, used by drug addicts and fly tippers.

Views amongst members were divided. Former Chief Commoner Jonathan Charkham in particular had strong views. Members recall him speaking vigorously at Committee against the choice of Paterson Park; and files include an interesting letter from him to Judith Mayhew pointing to the narrow streets, the "dismal looking" local housing, and the "...horrid walk to the distant underground".

He may have had a point in urging the City against this particular choice. Objections during local consultation on the establishment of the academy focussed almost entirely on the site: it was widely accepted that Southwark needed a new school. Ultimately, indeed, concerns over the site and the consequent loss to the borough of open space led to the Mayor, Ken Livingstone, directing Southwark to refuse planning approval, and to judicial review proceedings against Southwark, and seriously delayed the building of the academy.

In the meantime, other arrangements proceeded. The board was constituted, with historian Bill Fraser as chairman. The principal—Martyn Coles, a head teacher from east London—was selected, but due to delays in the agreement with government his appointment was only confirmed before Easter in the opening year, giving him effectively just one term to make key appointments and arrangements (though, thanks to the generosity of his previous school, he had already been working on plans for the academy alongside his previous job). The academy invited applications for admission, and was heavily oversubscribed, despite the lack of a building.

Finally on 3 September 2003, the academy opened, in portakabins on a temporary site in Peckham Rye. The funding agreement setting out the terms of the government's support was signed the next day.

For the next year students were bussed daily to Peckham Rye; for a further year they inhabited portakabins on the Paterson Park site; and it was only after the academy had been open for two years that it moved into its permanent home, a light and ground-breaking new building designed by architects Studio E which promptly won a “better public building” award and was praised by the Prime Minister.

The principal Martyn Coles was able to report that the City of London Academy had had an eventful history but was now successfully established and flourishing, and to express determination that it would make a significant positive difference to the lives of the pupils that came into the school.

The academy rapidly became a “favourite” for ministerial and other visitors, and Andrew Adonis, architect of the sponsored academies programme, credits a visit there as persuading Gordon Brown to continue the policy when he became Prime Minister.

You might think that given the effort involved in opening it the Corporation would pause there, sit back and watch Southwark grow. But by 2004—just as the anti-academy campaign was gathering pace—rumours started circulating that the City was considering sponsoring a second. Common Councilman Billy Dove, one of the Southwark governors, was very concerned. The files show exchanges between him and then Chairman of Policy and Resources Michael Snyder expressing that. Was the Chairman aware, he asked, of the exceptional challenges which the Corporation had faced in getting Southwark up and running, and the huge expense of officer time, over and above the £2 million contribution?

To no avail. The City was intent on building its academies programme, and in place of one further academy concluded that joint sponsorships would enable two to be developed, both with a business focus.

In this they were helped by an offer of support from KPMG, the large accountancy and financial services firm. Long based in Castle Baynard Ward, KPMG had a representative on the Southwark board, and was keen to identify its own project, near to its new offices in Canary Wharf, where it could focus its CSR effort and demonstrate its commitment to education and the local community.

One co-sponsor in the bag, the City considered in earnest where its new schools should be. The two obvious choices were Islington and Hackney.

The first to be selected was Islington. A proposal came to Committee that the City should co-sponsor a re-start of Islington Green School.

Islington Green was a school with a history. A comprehensive from 1966, it

found fame in 1979 when its pupils performed in Pink Floyd's *Another Brick in the Wall*, singing "We don't want no education". Academically it had foundered, and gained particular notoriety (knowing the pattern of secondary transition in Islington schools, I think unfairly) as the local school which the Blairs rejected for their own children. When it failed its OFSTED inspection in 1997 rumour had it that this was politically motivated. Rumour which was possibly true: a later Freedom of Information request by Ken Muller (remember that name?) revealed that the inspection team had not considered it to be failing but had been overruled by the department.

Islington itself was not a borough in favour of academies; the administration made clear that they were only agreeing as a necessary way of getting money for schools from government. The first of its two academies, St Mary Magdalen, faced bitter opposition and judicial review proceedings.

When the City's plans to sponsor the relaunch of the school as an academy became public, opposition soon surfaced. A letter was received by Michael Snyder from an organisation describing itself as "Islington Against Academies", expressing that in no uncertain terms.

"If the big businessmen and financiers who "elect" the Lord Mayor of London and the Corporation of London's Common Council wish to make donations towards providing a decent education for Islington's children, let them do it without strings and, dare we say it, without the offer of a peerage in return!"

The school had an existing cohort of students upset that their school was being closed and reopened; a staff room largely opposed to the change (including Ken Muller); and longstanding behavioural issues.

Furthermore the plan was to build the new school on a very small site with the students in situ and having their lessons surrounded by building works—and in fact to develop at the same time a second school on the same site, the Richard Cloudesley special school.

The City and the co-sponsor it had found, City University, had, therefore, taken on a significant task, and this was not helped when within three years of opening the initial Principal moved on mid-year, exam results continued to decline rather than improve, and concerns were expressed by the local community.

Radical steps were needed, and in April 2012 the governors appointed an Executive Principal to help oversee the school until a new principal was appointed and firmly in place. The Executive Principal brought with him a clear no-nonsense approach: the need for change was urgent, he told parents, and it would therefore be immediate. Students and families were reminded of the Academy's rules and expectations, and these were strictly enforced, leading

to more than one mention in the press and other media. But the governors and City have held firm, and with the start of the new Principal in September 2012, the Academy shows every sign of being at last on the right track.

In Hackney, meanwhile, the City was being encouraged to open a school in Homerton, in one of the more difficult parts of the borough, fraught with gang violence, poverty, unemployment and underachievement. Islington was a challenge; but so too was this. The file indicates concern from the Town Clerk, by then Chris Duffield, about the trouble the City might be getting itself into.

Much however was militating in its favour. Hackney had adopted a policy of closing failing secondary schools and replacing them with academies with carefully selected sponsors willing to work closely with them and with other schools. One, Mossbourne Community Academy, was already open, and doing very well; two more were in the pipeline. KPMG embraced the idea of co-sponsoring a school there, and dedicated significant staff time and resource to making it a success. Initial consultation was entirely positive, with parents desperate to get their children into the school (the Academy was even threatened with judicial review in an attempt to make it open earlier than planned). An experienced and respected local head teacher was appointed as principal, from a strong field; in place a full five terms before scheduled opening, he was able with the governors to build up a team of dedicated and enthusiastic staff, and to plan meticulously for the Academy's curriculum and method of operation.

True, there were significant difficulties with the proposed site, not least that it changed twice during the planning phase, leaving the City's project team with very little time to complete the building for opening in September 2009. And a last-minute hitch with the electricity connection which looked likely to delay opening, until I spotted the chief executive of the relevant power company at a City banquet and accosted him in the Egyptian Hall.

But, in September 2009, the City Academy, Hackney, duly opened, on Homerton Road, on a site which had been in educational use for generations since a truant school had opened on the site in 1878.

The Prime Minister Gordon Brown visited unexpectedly on the Academy's third day, to the students' amazement; and it was formally opened by the then Lord Mayor Ian Luder, Castle Baynard Alderman, on 4 November 2009: an emotional moment for him, as his own father had taught Maths and Technical Drawing at an earlier school on the site from 1947 to 1973.

So far, the Academy has been thriving. Operating on very simple principles, it has three priorities: excellent behaviour, outstanding teaching, and enjoyable and successful learning, all underpinned by uncompromisingly high aspirations and expectations. There is a clear and rigorous system of rules, rewards and

sanctions; an emphasis on providing creative and exciting teaching; and support for the students to enable them to learn. So far it has been judged “outstanding” by OFSTED on two inspections, under every heading reviewed; and though it does not face full GCSEs until 2014 appears to be heading for excellent results.

It has also been able to help the City’s wider academy effort; it is the Hackney principal who (after extensive conversations in corridors!) is currently on part-time secondment to Islington as Executive Principal to help the transformation there.

Continuing on track requires however constant vigilance. Hackney may be a borough in the course of transformation, but the academy is within sight of the scenes of 2011’s riots, and serious social issues remain. Can we carry early promise to fruition in the form of real—and continuing—exam success and achievement? Can we continue that when the outstanding team currently running the Academy moves on, as inevitably it will?

As Andrew Adonis says in his recent book—also entitled “Education, Education, Education”—every school is a work in progress, even the best.

This is a serious question, for all the City’s academies. The City has put its name and considerable reputation at stake in backing them, particularly at a time when expectations from schools are becoming more rigorous and uncompromising, and when government is making clear that it will hold sponsors to account for their school’s success or failure. Can the City give these new schools the on-going support they will need for continuing success?

I look forward to a paper in years to come telling us that it has. That will be a real achievement, and a contribution to our neighbouring boroughs like no other: helping young people, whatever their background, to enjoy, aspire and achieve; to find values and success.