

FUNDING FEARS HIGHLIGHTED AT AUTUMN CONFERENCE

Academies were disappointed that the Government had retreated on plans for a National Funding Formula, IAA chair **David Wootton** told the Association's autumn conference in Nottingham.

Speaking to 150 delegates at the National College in October, he said he was 'saddened' that the Government's consultation paper on funding reform suggested that local authorities could continue to develop their own formulas, and would decide academy funding in their areas.

"This was a retrograde step," he said. "We saw the great opportunity that a national funding formula offered in terms of transparency and fairness. None of us pretended it would be easy moving to a national formula. We knew that it would take time, and that some transitional protection would be required. I hope the Government will think again."

EBacc worries

David Wootton also said that the decision to press ahead with plans for the English Baccalaureate could threaten academy freedoms. "So, in academies do we have curriculum freedom in theory, or will academies will feel compelled for reputational reasons to follow the EBacc?" he asked.

Mr Wootton said that academies should develop partnerships to support and improve education within their communities: "Through voluntary collaboration between academies, we can often achieve more together than we can achieve on our own."

Growth of academies

Lord Hill, the schools minister, sent a video message of support to the conference, while **Andrew McCully**, Director of the Academies Delivery Group at the Department for Education, noted that in the last year, the number of converter academies had risen from 55 to 1031. There were 101 new chains and 1646 schools which were being supported by the converter academies. There were 478 primary academies in the pipeline and 36 open or planned special academies. There were also 52 more sponsored academies open than last year, with 78 in development and 155 being brokered.

Collaboration

Steve Munby, Chief Executive of the National College, said that the future would be sector-led, high bar and collaborative. "Autonomy is great, but autonomy with mediocre leadership is a recipe for disaster," he said. "We need great leaders at the heart of thinking. The best leadership development in the world is about developing leaders on the job, exposing them to outstanding practice, with opportunities to reflect, rather than through books and lectures." Teaching Schools – 100 alliances have already been announced - will play an important part in the new system, working with universities to train new teachers, leading CPD, developing leadership and supporting other schools.

David Carter, executive principal of the Cabot Learning Federation, said that here were important issues in balancing a clear brand with academy autonomy. Working in a federation within the academy movement accelerated improvement at Cabot academies. Core values were crucial, with a promise to deliver outstanding education to every academy student. Schools in the federation are viewed as siblings, rather than twins. Each school will develop in its own way, although there will be clear core features. Good practice developed in one academy is shared with others, so the local mission should reflect the federation mission.

Leading the system

Dr Elizabeth Sidwell, the Schools Commissioner, urged academies to lead the system rather than relying on DFE advisers “When I first moved into the Department in May, they were going to employ 80 advisers,” she said. “Instead we agreed to employ ten, which is plenty.” The DFE is quite exercised about system accountability, and she challenged academies to offer solutions that would avoid the creation of new intermediary bodies. “They’re petrified about the Secretary of State having 2,000 funding agreements and having to monitor each school.” She said she was particularly keen to support 22 academies that were causing concern: they needed help from successful academies.

Panel debate: Academies’ social mission

Conor Ryan chaired a panel debate on the social mission aspect of the conference theme of ‘freedom for good.’ Asked by one delegate whether poverty conditions attainment, **Dr Sue Attard**, principal of Lark Rise Academy, Bedfordshire said that schools had to treat every child as a human being and help their families. That should be the social mission of every school. Treating every child as a human being would lead to improved attainment. “Poverty is too often used an excuse by the satisfactory and inadequate people in our profession for their inadequacies,” she added.

Sir Bruce Liddington, chief executive of E-Act and a former Schools Commissioner said that poverty does condition attainment unless you do something about it. E-Act sees tackling poverty as a key goal. Today, there is comparatively less additional resource available to make up for poverty. With reduced resources, we need to focus on using academy flexibilities, including pay and conditions and timetable, to ensure that the poor students do as well in future.

Sarah Counter, principal of Canary Wharf College Free School in London, said that it was a fair criticism of free schools that the first such schools may have focused less on poverty, but in future allocations would be postcode-allocated, and this would produce a strong social mix. At her free school, the child of Citibank’s MD would sit beside the poorest of the poor.

Nick Weller executive principal of Dixons City Academy and vice-chair of the IAA said that free schools added excess capacity to academies which would benefit the poorest pupils by allowing poor schools to close. It would reintroduce some of the rigour of the early academies.

Asked what had happened to the initial drive to look after the neediest pupils in academies **Dr Elizabeth Sidwell**, the Schools Commissioner, rejected the idea that the programme was ignoring the weakest schools. There were over 300 sponsored academies, though it was challenging finding sponsors especially for primary schools, and those sponsors will often be converter academies. **Sir Bruce Liddington** didn’t believe that the programme had been diluted, and he believed the DFE was focusing more than ever on the schools needing to improve.

However, while **Nick Weller** accepted that there had been a renewed focus on sponsorship after the initial rush to conversion, and converters had a lot to contribute as sponsors, he suggested there was also a ‘beauty parade’ now where sponsors are afraid to advocate radical solutions for fear of scaring away potential schools. **Liz Sidwell** responded this only happened as a last resort where a selection panel is used, with decisions made by Lord Hill.

NEW SERVICES FOR ACADEMIES

At the Nottingham conference, **David Wootton** launched two new services for IAA members. **IAA Consultancy** will provide quality assured school improvement support and external evaluation for academies. It will use only expertise gained from other successful academies. For more information, email IAA@dandtassociatesltdeducationalsolutions.com

A new partnership being piloted with **Nexus Associates** will provide networking and brokerage, to improve procurement of essential services in schools. Providers will be quality assured, with regular market testing steered by academy leaders, and services shaped by the IAA. Brokerage is free to members, and some of the revenue will pay for new educational research and development. For more information, contact.....