

Democratic Audit UK

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Should we be worried about controversial government plans to do away with parent governors in schools?

*The government recently announced a series of changes to the oversight and governance of schools, with the most controversial concerning the 'academisation' of all English secondary schools, and what may amount to the abolition of the role of the parent governor. Here, **Andrew Wilkins** casts his eye over the changes – and in particular the latter, arguing that we now have an opportunity to think seriously about building capacity to harness the creative energy of families and communities as co-producers and co-creators of education services.*

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In a new [white paper](#) published on 17 March 2016 the British government outlined its vision for state education over the next five years. In an ambitious move that is likely to see the wholesale transfer of public resources and power to private hands, the

government issued plans to transform all state-funded schools into academies ('state-funded independent schools') by 2022 at the latest.

These reforms include removing the requirement for school governing bodies to retain democratically elected members, namely parent governors, and for more schools to sacrifice their autonomy and join the ranks of 'chain schools' under the direction of large academy sponsors or multi-academy trusts (MATs).

For those who have been monitoring the activities of government policy over the last thirty years, these [neoliberal reforms](#) should not come as a surprise. The current Conservative government and Coalition government before them have ushered in policies which suggest a continuation, albeit acceleration and expansion, of the reforms set in motion by the Labour government when they introduced the city academies programme in 2000.

In fact, these reforms have their beginnings in the 1980s and the establishment of City Technology Colleges (CTCs) under the Local Management of Schools. CTCs and academies operate in roughly the same way, with discretionary powers that allow them to bypass the authority of local governments.

Depoliticisation

Then and now, the focus has always been to transform education through 'depoliticisation' and 'marketisation'. Depoliticisation means de-democratisation: it entails removing the vested interests of elected bodies and persons – politicians, local councils and now parent governors – from decisions about education. Marketisation is partly what drives an obsession with depoliticisation because it places huge demands on schools to make themselves accountable as competitive, customer-oriented, 'high-reliability', cost-effective organisations.

There is nothing more dangerous to the narrow realisation of schools as businesses than the vagaries of democratic discourse and the obstructiveness of debating and reconciling value differences about the meaning of education and what it means to be educated.

The proposal to remove the requirement for schools to have parent governors on their governing bodies will be a crushing blow for advocates of a stakeholder model of school governance. But again, these proposals are not surprising given the creeping '[professionalisation](#)' of school governance over the last six years.

The professionalisation of school governance has arisen largely in response to the demands and requirements of running an academy or free school (legally the same thing). In both cases there is an expectation that governing bodies supplant the assessor/overseer/appraiser role of local authorities.

This explains why governors now find themselves subject to a barrage of external and internal steering and monitoring, including self-evaluation, skills audit, inspection and the recently announced '[competency framework](#)'. It also explains why the government are so keen for powers to be removed from governing bodies and concentrated among

MAT boards. Both government and non-government bodies have grave concerns about the suitability of certain governors to hold senior school leaders to account for multi-million pound organisations.

Conceding authority to ‘experts’

Consider when in 2013 the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools, Lord Nash, addressed the Independent Academies Association (IAA) [by saying](#) ‘people should be appointed on a clear prospectus and because of their skills and expertise as governors; not simply because they represent particular interest group’. And in 2014 when Sir Michael Wilshaw, the Chief Inspector of Schools in England and Head of Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills), [announced](#) ‘there’s a need for professional governance to move beyond the current ‘amateurish’ approach to overseeing schools’.

The rhetoric suggests that the business of school governance is too risky in the hands of ‘amateurs’ – a synonym used to reference ‘non-experts’ or any person not belonging to the professional-managerial class. Hence the government’s fondness for MATs and MAT boards: they use [‘professionals to hold individual school-level heads to account’](#). But they also lack significant democratic accountability and are notoriously [top-down and hierarchical](#). The MAT board retains power over strategy, curriculum, admissions (subject to the admissions code), and staff pay and conditions for its schools. It is not uncommon for a sponsor academy directed by MAT board to have a governing body. The problem is that where they do exist, called ‘local governing bodies’, they operate as advisory groups with monitoring duties and therefore token powers.

These new providers of education are not only anti-democratic but they are perversely anti-market – how exactly does producer capture support choice, competition and diversity of provision in a school system?

But should we worried about the absence of parent governors on governing bodies?

Participatory governance

Between 2012 and 2015 I led an [Economic and Social Research Council \(ESRC\)-funded project](#) looking at school governance in England. The research for this project is outlined in a new book to be published by Routledge in June 2016, entitled [Modernising school governance: Corporate planning and expert handling of state education](#). In the book I detail how all governors, and that includes parent governors, regardless of their so-called ‘representative’ function, are conscripted to a service agent role: they monitor targets and outcomes, ratify documents, and carry out important checks and balances to enhance succession planning, quality control and efficient resource allocation.

These forms of managerial accountability are important to schools so long as we continue to treat them like businesses. But they in no way constitute the kinds of meaningful bottom-up, horizontal expressions of citizen empowerment we are likely to find imagined through [Prime Minister Cameron’s vision of a ‘Big Society’](#).

We need to take this opportunity to think seriously about building capacity to harness the creative energy of families and communities as co-producers and co-creators of education services. For this to be achievable we need create welcoming, inclusive spaces that engender forms of debate, collaboration and participation. Crucially, it means setting families and communities free of the burden of technical-bureaucratic directives that now beleaguer the everyday work of ordinary governors.

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