England Confronts the Limits of School Autonomy

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Abstract

In March 2016, the Conservative government of British Prime Minister David Cameron announced plans for the most sweeping overhaul of the English system of primary and secondary education in 75 years. Central to its vision is a call for all 20,000 English government-funded schools to become autonomous "academies" by 2022, a dramatic extension of policy trends initiated by prior governments. In recognition of the limits of autonomy, however, the plan also calls for most academies to band together in Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), and for a new bureaucratic structure of Regional Schools Commissioners reporting to the central Government to assume some of the school improvement functions previously carried out by Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Drawing on interviews and perusal of prior studies and government documents, we critically evaluate the case for academies and MATs and for reducing the role of the local authorities. We examine the practical challenges the government faces in implementing these ambitious policies and raise questions about how likely the plan is to serve broad public interests. We conclude that academisation and school autonomy, while potentially helpful in some contexts, are imperfect means of addressing the challenges faced by struggling schools and their students and that the move to academies will reduce local community input into education.

I.   <u>Introduction</u>

In March 2016 the Conservative government of British Prime Minister David Cameron published an education white paper laying out its vision for the most sweeping overhaul of the English system of primary and secondary education since the end of World War II.[1] The document, entitled *Educational Excellence Everywhere,* applies to all schools in England but not to those in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, which have their own education systems.

The central thrust of the white paper is a call for all 20,000 English schools to become "academies" by 2022.[2] Academies are autonomous schools, analogous to charter schools in the U.S., that enjoy operational freedom in matters such as admissions, the hiring of teachers, curriculum, and salaries. Each academy is established as a charitable trust and funded by, and directly responsible to, the national Secretary of State for Education rather than to a local authority. The white paper also calls for the government to encourage all academies – and to require many of them – to join Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). A MAT is a charitable trust that works to challenge and support its member academies and to provide them with central office services such as human resources and accounting.

The vision contained in *Educational Excellence Everywhere* incorporates and builds on several recent trends in English education, including the devolution of increasing amounts of authority to individual schools that began 25 years ago and increased emphasis on cooperation among schools for purposes of school improvement. Most importantly, it embraces the creation and proliferation of academies and MATs that has occurred over the last 15 years and proposes that they replace local authorities as the basic building blocks of a new education system.

While supportive of the idea of giving schools maximum operational freedom, the white paper is frank to acknowledge the limitations of such autonomy in furthering broad public interests. Specifically, the government plan acknowledges that autonomous status for schools, in and of itself, is unlikely to bring about the desired goal of significant school improvement in all parts of the country. Thus it calls for a system of "supported autonomy" under which the thousands of academies would be backed up not only by MATs but by a combination of other structures, including head teacher associations, groups of model teaching schools, and a corps of nationally certified educators. Oversight of these structures falls to a network of regional school

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[1] This white paper may be accessed at the Web site of the U.K. Department of Education: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/508447/Educational_Excellence_Everywhere.pdf A government white paper is a government report on a particular subject giving information and details of future planned laws. Within a parliamentary system, the government in power is typically in a position to pass the necessary laws.

[2] As of January 2016, there were 20,179 state funded primary and secondary schools in England, of which 16,778 were primary schools. Other categories of schools include nursery schools, special schools, pupil referral units and independent schools. The total with these other categories is 24,288. Source. National Statistics, Schools, Pupils and Characteristics, Table 2a. Department for Education, June, 2016.

administrators reporting to the central government. Since funding for education will no longer be channeled through local authorities, the plan also requires a new way of distributing education funding across schools and regions.

The proposed increase in the number of academies from the current figure of about 4,500 to 20,000 represents a huge, and somewhat paradoxical, change in the way English education is organized. While devolving significant powers from local authorities to autonomous schools and MATs, the new system at the same time requires significant centralization of supervisory functions and the establishment of new bureaucratic structures controlled by the central government. Critics, of whom there are many, claim that the vision contained in the white paper is both overly ambitious and unnecessary and that the structures it would require are unmanageable and overly centralized and bureaucratic.

Under pressure from many of its own backbenchers, the Conservative government in May 2016 backed down from some elements of the proposal, most notably the requirement that every school, regardless of how effective it may be, convert to academy status. The outlook for the plan is now unclear given the political turmoil that followed the June, 2016 referendum vote for Britain to leave the European Union. Nevertheless, as was clear from the Queen's speech to Parliament in May in which she laid out the government's parliamentary agenda for the year, the overriding policy objective of Conservatives is to lay the groundwork for full academisation of the English school system as soon as possible.

In this paper, we describe and analyze the structural and other components of the educational vision inherent in the white paper both as a significant policy development in its own right and for the purpose of drawing lessons for the U.S. and other countries where similar trends are evident. Autonomous charter schools, both free standing and as parts of chains, are a growing force in the U.S., and some states are using them as the preferred mechanism to turn around some of their lowest performing schools. While researchers often tend to focus on relatively narrow questions such as whether pupils are likely to perform better in charter or in traditional public schools, large scale movements toward charter schools or their equivalent raise a broad set of systemic issues that also warrant attention. For example, can a system of autonomous schools be managed from the center? If not, what structures might be needed to replace the functions of local districts?

The white paper represents a serious effort to design a comprehensive set of structures for a new system built around autonomous schools and to anticipate problems related to the limits of such an approach. We believe that a critical analysis of the components that the government deems necessary for an effective all-academy system can contribute to a deeper understanding of such systems. We have discovered from our own previous international research that the examination of such bold and comprehensive policy changes in entire education systems can

often yield more powerful insights about their ramifications than focusing on more incremental changes.[3]

Research for this paper is based largely on a month-long visit to London shortly after the release of the white paper in the spring of 2016. Building on our contacts and findings from a prior research project on the so-called London Effect (Fiske and Ladd, 2016), we interviewed key policy makers at both the national and local levels and reviewed government documents, commission and think tank reports, and academic articles. We are grateful to the Institute for Fiscal Studies for hosting our visit and also to the many people who shared their time and insights with us. A list of the people we interviewed is included at the end of the paper.

II. <u>Background on the English school system</u>

The modern English school system dates back to a 1944 law that required all local authorities to have a democratically elected council with an education committee and an appointed director of education. Over time, the responsibilities of local authorities for the schools under their control, known as "maintained" schools,[4] evolved considerably. In the late 1980s individual schools were given more managerial responsibility, and the national government took on more authority for curriculum and funding.[5] In addition, the government established an independent inspectorate system, known as Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education), in the mid-1990s to evaluate the quality of all state-funded schools on a periodic basis. Ofsted continues to inspect schools and to rate them as outstanding, good, needing improvement or inadequate. Local authorities are specifically charged with improving the quality of their maintained schools that receive low Ofsted ratings.

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[3] See Fiske and Ladd (2000). In this book about New Zealand's bold experiment with school autonomy and competition among schools in the late 1980s and 1990s, we draw lessons for the U.S. and other countries about reforms of that type that remain relevant for policy discussions today.

[4] Maintained schools include community schools (the largest group), voluntarily controlled schools, voluntarily aided schools, and foundation schools. The voluntarily controlled and aided schools are mainly religious schools, and foundation schools are those that were formerly grant maintained schools. There are some differences across the categories in who appoints the governors for the schools, who owns the land, and who serves as their admissions authority.

[5] For a detailed description of the evolution of local authorities, see Hill (2012). They were initially called local education authorities, but in 2009, the name was changed to local authorities. We use local authorities (LAs) throughout this paper.

The growth of academies

The situation began to change in 2002,[6] when the Labour government introduced what they termed "academies" as a solution to the ongoing problems of struggling schools in disadvantaged areas. The idea was to engage wealthy philanthropists and business people, many of whom were friends of the prime minister, in the cause of education by having them sponsor schools that would be given the freedom and the funding needed to make them excel, including a required £2 million contribution from the original sponsors. These sponsored academies were set up as charitable trusts, operated outside the control of the local authorities, and were authorized and funded directly by the Government. The first academies were opened in 2002/03, and by 2010 the total had risen to 203 throughout the country, all of them secondary schools serving large proportions of disadvantaged pupils.
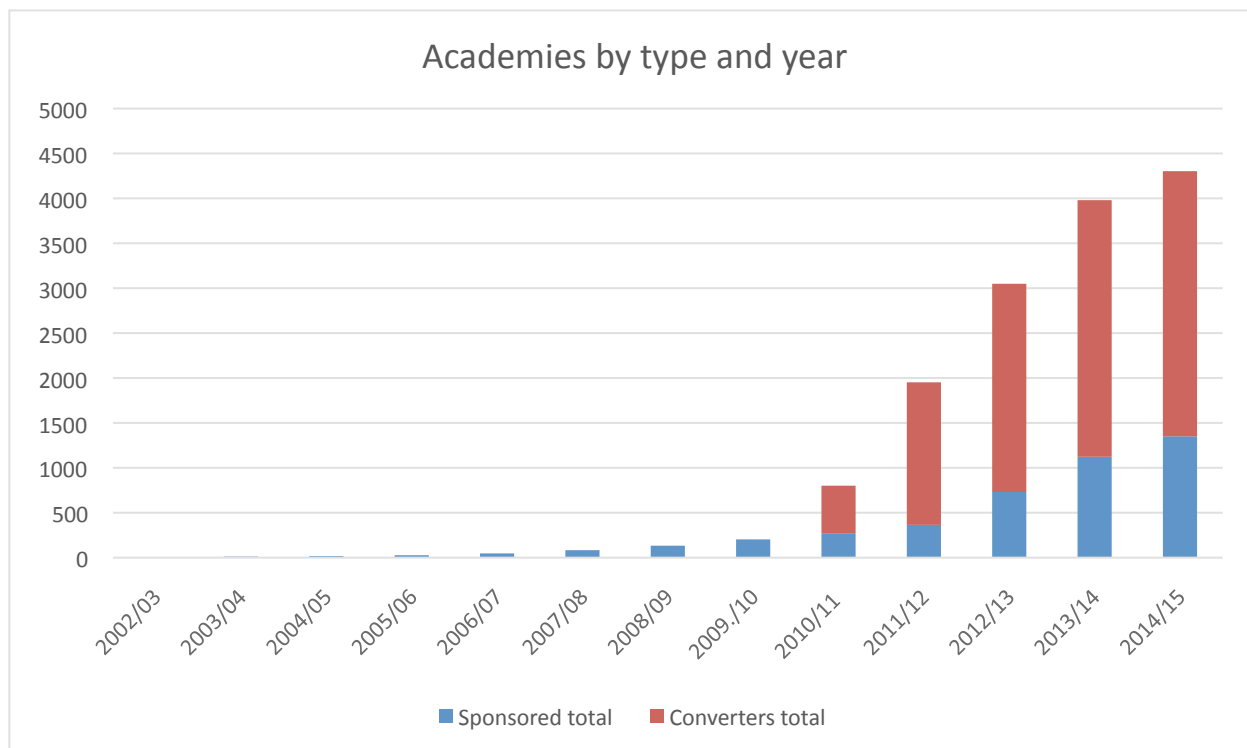
Both the number and the type of academies changed dramatically with the Academies Act of 2010, which was introduced by the newly formed coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. In addition to promoting more sponsored academies, this government expanded the academy option, until then limited to struggling secondary schools, to include successful schools at both the secondary and the primary levels. The intent, consistent with a conservative world view, was to give as much autonomy to as many schools as possible. In particular, all schools were invited to convert, but the applications of schools that Ofsted deemed outstanding (and subsequently also those deemed good) were fast-tracked to convert, with the costs of conversion to be financed by the government. In addition, the government promoted a new type of school – free schools – that would be established from scratch to meet the perceived needs of ethnic minorities and other groups that wanted their own schools. For all practical purposes, free schools are the same as academies. Thus, on the eve of the 2016 white paper, the English state education system, in addition to maintained schools, included sponsored academies, converter academies, and free schools. Many of the sponsored academies were operated by chains with charismatic leaders or by charitable trusts committed to social good. Chains of academies serve primary schools, secondary schools or a combination of both.

The years 2010-2013 have been referred to as the "Wild West" of academy growth (interview, Greany, 2016). Large chains of academies sought to expand by competing to take over failing schools regardless of where they were located. The more schools in the chain, the more funding was available for its central office activities. The Coalition government fostered additional growth of academies by directing that all capital funding for new schools be used only for academies. During the two-year period, more than 2,000 schools, converted to academy status.

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[6] Actually the change started a few years earlier with the introduction of City Technology Colleges, but the first academies opened in 2002/03.

It soon became clear that the initial Labour funding model for academies was not sustainable because of the generous amount of funds flowing to academies. Lord John Nash, a former venture capitalist who was appointed Under Secretary for Education in 2013, put a stop to the "Wild West" atmosphere of academy growth. He installed a business-like management orientation, promoted smaller and more geographically coherent chains, and encouraged successful academies to sponsor less successful schools. In 2014, 25 academy chains were, at least temporarily, prevented from further expansion.[7]

Nonetheless by the time of the 2016 white paper, the total number of academies had grown to 4,500, representing more than a fifth of all 20,000 elementary and secondary schools. As shown in the following figure, about two-thirds of them were converter rather than sponsored academies. Academies are far more prevalent at the secondary level, where they represent 60 percent of all secondary schools, than at the primary level, where they account for only 15 percent of a far larger number of schools.[8] The first primary academies were established in 2011.

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[7] The Parliamentary Select Committee on Education reported that the number of chains on the capped or paused list had varied from 25 in February 2014 to 18 in October and that the criteria by which academy trusts are monitored and capped are not in the public domain. The Department of Education confirmed to the Parliamentary Committee that they take a case-by-case view and pay attention to the structure of the trust as well as to performance. The Committee noted the fact that Ofsted played no role in decisions to cap or pause academy chains. (Source, Parliamentary Committee on Education, Fourth report on Academies and free schools, January 2015, Sections 135 and 136.)

[8] Free schools (which are not included in the graph) are far more limited, accounting for only about 4 percent of all primary schools and 6 percent of secondary schools.

Somewhat more than half of the academies belong to an academy chain, which the Department for Education defines as a group of three or more academies.[9] Some of the chains are quite formal, with all the member academies linked through a formal trust arrangement and typically sharing a common educational model; others have far looser arrangements and may not even call themselves a chain. The largest chain is the Academies Enterprise Trust, with 66 member academies. The best-known chains include United Learning, with 41 academies; Ark, with 29; and the Harris Federation, with 28. The following table makes it clear that, despite widespread public attention surrounding the larger chains, most of the academy chains are quite small, with between three and seven schools.

Table 1. Number of academy chains by size of chain (defined as 3 or more academies)

Size of chain	Number of chains	Number of academies in chains
>25 (28-66)	12	467
13-25	20	340
8-12	42	412
4-7	144	742
3	109	370
Total	327	2331

Source, Calculated by the authors from the Department for Education Academies Report, 2013-14, and the School Census 2015.

Along with the growth in academies came a commensurate decline in the power and funding for local authorities, which saw the number of maintained schools under their control decline as academies proliferated. Local authorities faced funding challenges in part because the money for authority-wide school improvement services that they had previously received in the form of a school improvement grant was being redirected to newly established academies.[10]

The white paper vision

The 2016 white paper *Educational Excellence for Everyone*, crafted by the newly elected Conservative Government, articulates a vision for English education that embraces these trends and takes them to new levels. Consistent with the government's belief that decisions made by educational leaders at the school level are better than those made by bureaucracies, the plan calls

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[9] Another 178 groupings have two academies.
[10] In addition to their dedicated schools funding, local authorities receive an Education Services Grant for school improvement services. When a school converts to academy status, it takes its pro-rata share of these school improvement funds even if it is a high-performing school with limited need for such funds relative to other schools within the local authority. See below for additional discussion of school funding policies.

for all 20,000 primary and secondary schools to become academies, ideally by 2020 but certainly by 2022. The plan also requires all struggling schools to join a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) and strongly encourages all other academies to do so. The MAT concept is a logical extension of the existing academy chains and of policy makers' belief in the importance of school-to school collaboration, an approach that the national government had been promoting, and with which many local authorities had been experimenting, during the previous 15 years.

This new vision builds on these trends with a significant additional devolution of operational authority to individual schools and MATs at the expense of the local authorities. Local authorities would no longer have responsibility for any maintained schools, signifying that the government has little confidence in these local governing authorities to promote high-quality education throughout the country. At the same time, the white paper implicitly concedes that the concept of a system of autonomous schools has its limitations. It specifies that local authorities are still needed to carry out important functions that lie beyond the capability of autonomous schools. Specifically, it mandates that local authorities continue to retain three residual responsibilities: assuring a place for every child, protecting the interests of vulnerable children, and "championing the interests of children and families."

The document also acknowledges that in order to assure that autonomous academies and MATs operate efficiently and serve broad public interests, they require the support and supervision of additional structures. Thus the white paper calls for an expanded role for the nine Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs), which were initially established in 2014 to oversee individual academies and who are directly responsible to the National Secretary of State for Education. Their remit will now be expanded to find sponsors for struggling schools and provide support for the growing numbers of MATs. The RSCs carry out their work through a number of other structures, notably head teacher associations, alliances of teaching schools, and a corps of nationally certified education leaders. In addition, the white paper calls for the development of a new national school funding scheme that will be appropriate to a fully academised system and assure each individual school its equitable share of resources given the needs of its students and the costs it faces.

In sum, while a major goal of the white paper is to promote school autonomy, it also tries to address the most obvious limits of that autonomy. It recognizes that most schools need some sort of professional backup in order to perform at high levels, that some sort of system is needed to identify and support failing schools, and that the collective needs of all children within the local community cannot be met by schools and MATs acting only in their own interests. In the following sections, we critically evaluate the arguments underlying the vision and assess the feasibility of implementing it.

III. How compelling is the case for academies and MATs?

The case for a fully academised system builds on two main pillars. The first is the original argument that motivated the Labour government to set up the first academies in the early 2000s, namely that sponsored academies are the best way to address the challenges of struggling schools serving disadvantaged pupils in areas of high disadvantage. The second argument, forcefully made by the Coalition government in 2010 and again by the Conservative government in its 2016 white paper, is that the autonomy provided to academies has the potential to "unleash greatness" throughout the education system. In making this argument, Conservatives acknowledged that academies still need the backup of multi-academy trusts (MATS) as a structured way for them to learn from each other and to benefit from economies of scale. The structure of MATs is designed to meet the government's goal of developing a school-led system of school improvement.

Success of the early sponsored academies

The government had some good empirical evidence to support its view that academies can be more effective in raising student achievement than the schools maintained by the local authorities. Generalizing from this evidence is problematic, however, because it is based on the performance of the sponsored academies established during the Labour years. These early academies differed in significant ways from those that were established after 2010 as well as from most of the new academies that would emerge after the 2016 white paper.

The evidence of the success of the early sponsored academies comes from a careful study by the economists Eyles and Machin (2015). Using data on pupils enrolled in academies between 2000/01 and 2008/09, they compared the characteristics and achievement of pupils in academies with that of pupils enrolled in a carefully chosen group of comparison schools, namely those schools that were not academies at the time but went on to become academies after 2008/09.[11]

The authors find that the transformation to sponsored academy status substantially raised educational outcomes (by 0.14 standard deviations on average), with the effects increasing as pupils experienced more years of academy status (p. 28). Moreover, they were larger for the schools that had previously been community schools – and hence experienced the largest gains in autonomy – than for the other types of schools. Additional corroborative evidence of success emerges from their finding that Ofsted ratings of school quality improved disproportionately

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[11] This study represents an improvement over earlier studies that focused on the very early academies (e.g. Machin and Wilson (2008) and PwC (2008)) and over a 2010 National Audit Study that found positive effects, but could not rule out the possibility that higher ability students had been entering the academies over time. The Eyles and Machin study avoids that confounding factor by studying performance effects only for children who were enrolled in the converting schools before they became academies.

more for the schools that became academies during the study period than for the comparison schools. Finally, the authors conclude that a strong feature of academy conversions was the replacement of head teachers. This finding provides some suggestive evidence in support of the current government's view that one advantage of academies is that they can attract higher quality leaders.

The authors conclude their analysis, however, with the warning that their findings apply only to the sponsored academies promoted by the Labour Government and not to the vast set of new academies that followed the Academies Act of 2010. Further, in a following study (Eyles, Machin and Silva.2015) of the "new batch of academies," the authors reinforced their earlier warning by documenting a number of marked differences in the characteristics of the two types of schools. While the schools that became academies during the Labour period featured low attainment and a high share of disadvantaged students eligible for free school meals, the reverse is true for the more recent academies. Although at the time it was still too early to measure the performance effects of the post-2010 academies, the authors ended this second paper with a further caveat to policy makers: "Simple extrapolation from the evidence on the effects of the first batch of conversions to the second batch is clearly not warranted and potentially misleading" (Eyles, Machin, and Silva, 2015, p. 24). In follow-up research that has been presented, but not yet in published form, they find no achievement effects for academies that have been judged either good or less than good by Ofsted prior to becoming academies.[12]

Extrapolating from the early to the more recent academies would be misleading for other reasons as well. The early Labour-sponsored academies benefited from substantial additional resources not available to most new academies. In addition, Labour academies were all secondary schools, while the bulk of the projected new academies will be primary schools. That distinction matters because primary schools are relatively small and have limited capacity to benefit from expanded autonomy – and are more likely to be burdened by the loss of local authority support – than their larger secondary school counterparts.

Innovation and flexibility

The main argument for academies presented in the white paper is less evidence based. In particular, it promotes academisation as a means of introducing innovative leadership and operational flexibility to the English school system. "We believe that the fastest and most sustainable way for schools to improve is for the government to trust this country's most

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[12] This new study (Silvia et al. 2016) was summarized in PowerPoint form at a recent programme sponsored by the Sutton Trust. Using the same method as the previous study, but dividing the post -2010 academies into groups based on their pre-conversion Ofsted ratings, that authors find no positive outcome effects for schools that were rated good or below before they become academies. The only group of schools for which student achievement improved were those rated as outstanding before they became academies.

effective education leaders, giving them freedom and power, and holding them to account for unapologetically high standards for every child, measured rigorously and fairly," it declares (Section 1.14). It then goes on to proclaim, "You can mandate adequacy but you cannot mandate greatness. It has to be unleashed" (Section 1.15). To unleash greatness, the authors argue, many more schools would need the flexibility and autonomy provided to the early sponsored academies.

This rationale is consistent with the argument used by the prior Coalition government to justify its dramatic expansion of secondary academies in 2010; namely, that educators on the ground understand best what needs to be done to raise standards in their schools and are in the best position to respond effectively to local conditions (DFE, 2010). By giving more schools the autonomy and flexibility that had been provided to the early academies, policy makers hoped that schools would be able to recruit and attract higher quality school leaders who in turn would be able to raise standards through increased innovation. This view is also consistent with a core conservative belief that public services should be run by front-line professionals rather than centralized bureaucracies, regardless of whether those bureaucracies are at the national or local authority level. While all English schools had been given managerial control over their budgets in 1988, the academies were given additional autonomy in matters that had previously been the sole concern of the national government—namely, curriculum; teacher pay and working conditions; length of school day; and school improvement services—that had had been the purview of the local authorities.[13]

Although the white paper makes brief reference to potential benefits from competition and the end of "local monopolies" (see point 1.28)**,** its case for academies appears to be based much less on any potential benefits that might arise from schools competing for students and much more on the ability of school leaders to respond to local needs, to innovate, and to scale up what works.[14] In principle, the scaling up of what works would occur through the growth of the more successful academies and through the school-to-school collaboration—not the most common bedfellow of competition—built into the structure of MATs.

Despite the hope that academies would use their new freedoms to be more innovative, a report in 2013 by the Academies Commission – based on extensive input from various stakeholders and policy makers – concluded that the amount of innovation shown by existing academies was limited and at best piecemeal rather than comprehensive.[15] For example, the Commission cited results from a 2012 survey of about a third of the academies that were open at

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[13] All schools have recently been given more autonomy in the area of teacher pay.
[14] The most frequent reference to competition is in the context of free schools, which, unlike most academies, are established from scratch.
[15] This Academies Commission was charged with examining the impact of the academies program to date and to consider the challenges that an academies program would face going forward. It specifically was not charged with judging the desirability of a major expansion of academies. Established by the RSA and Pearson Think Tank, the Commission was chaired by Christine Gilbert, who had been head of Ofsted between 2006 and 2011.

that time showing that only a tenth of the academies had extended the school day, only 12 percent had changed the terms and conditions of service, and less than a third were using their curriculum freedoms (Academies Commission, 2013. p. 48 and following).[16] Based on this and other studies as well as input from many groups, the Commission concluded that "widespread innovation has yet to take hold across the sector" (p. 48)

The Commission provided a number of explanations for the limited amount of innovation that they observed, starting with the observation that most of the academies were very new and that maintained schools under the control of the local authorities already enjoyed considerable freedom and flexibility. Perhaps more relevant for the future evolution of academies, however, is the reality that the academies themselves are subject to a number of constraints, including national exams, operating restrictions imposed by the chains (or MATs) of which they are a part, and oversight by Ofsted – constraints that in practice limit their flexibility and their willingness to take risks.

Moreover, the Academies Report found that innovation was not a universally shared goal, especially for academies that had recently converted from being maintained schools. Given that Ofsted had judged them as good or outstanding schools before they converted, many of these schools saw little reason to change something that was not broken (p.52). In fact their incentive to become academies in some cases had less to do with a desire to innovate than to qualify for more funding an argument consistent with the survey cited in footnote 15). Many parents appeared to be more interested in having a good local school than in having an innovative one (Academies Commission, 2013, p.53).

One group that was conspicuously unenthusiastic about such changes, especially as they related to giving academies flexibility to set teacher pay and working conditions, was the teachers' unions. All of these unions opposed any erosion of the national pay and working conditions framework. Indeed the largest of them, the National Union of Teachers, called in May 2016 for a vote authorizing the union to start ongoing periodic strike actions in favor of the requirement that all schools, including academies, comply with the national standards for teachers. In late June, the union voted to support strike action. The Commission speculated that concerns about the politics of union opposition might also make academies reluctant to use their new freedoms to hire non-certified teachers.

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[16] A somewhat more recent survey by the Department for Education (Cirin 2014) presents similar findings. That survey, which had a response rate of 25 percent, indicated that while 18 percent of the academies indicated they wanted to use that status to make specific changes in the way the school operates (e.g., pay, terms, and school day length), only 1 percent said that was the main reason. The three main reasons were: to gain greater freedom to use funding as they see fit, to obtain more funding for front line education, and to raise education standards. At the time of the survey, 91 percent had changed or planned to change how they procured services previously provided by the local authority, 79 percent had or planned to change the curriculum (but the extent of the curricular changes were not specified) and 55 percent, the majority of which were sponsored academies, had changed school leadership.

In sum, based on their review of the evidence and submissions from stakeholders, the Academies Commission concluded that the Government needed to rethink its focus on the freedoms granted to academies as the driving force for change. (Academies Commission, 2013, p. 58).

The power of collaboration

Regardless of the government's interpretation of the evidence just discussed, the white paper concedes that stand-alone academies acting in isolation cannot achieve the goal of a self-improving school system. Instead, the government expects clusters of schools to work together and to support one another in addressing local problems. The main structure for promoting such school collaboration under the new policies is the Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). MATs fund their operations by taking a small percentage of the public funds available for each member academy.

School- to-school collaboration has been a hallmark of the English education system for many years and has been supported across party lines. For example, it was a significant component of the Labour government's London Challenge, a well-funded strategic effort that was started in 2003 to improve secondary schools in London and later expanded to primary schools and to other cities. The Coalition government also supported collaboration, asserting in its 2010 Education white paper entitled *The Importance of Teaching* (DFE 2010) that "schools working together leads to better results." The collaborations have taken a variety of forms ranging from informal partnerships in which schools help each other on matters such as curriculum design, professional development, and financial management, to teachers working together across schools, and to formal federations in which executive head teachers oversee the operation of several schools.

In recent years, the central government has moved aggressively to set up a variety of formal programs to promote school-to-school collaboration. In 2011, building on one of the components of the London Challenge, for example, the Department for Education established a program under which schools that have been judged to be "outstanding" by Ofsted and have strong records of working with other schools are designated as Teaching Schools (TS). Such schools are then encouraged to help other schools in areas such as initial teacher training, leadership and professional development, and research. According to the 2016 white paper, there were almost 700 teaching schools across the country in 2015, and the government has plans to establish up to 300 more, with the goal of ensuring full coverage across the country. The government has also encouraged the creation of Teaching School Alliances (TSAs), whereby schools would work together under the leadership of a lead Teaching School, and it plans to

actively expand the number of National Leaders of Education available to assist struggling schools.

Despite this clear commitment to the concept of school-to-school collaboration, very little is known about its impact. That is the conclusion of a 2015 report of the Department for Education on the English experience with collaborative school models (Armstrong, 2015) .The report cites one careful large-scale study of school federations in 2014 that found that certain types of federation outperformed a matched sample of their peers in non-federated schools in terms of their attainment. But overall, the evidence of direct impacts on students is limited, and the results are mixed at best.

The evidence for "indirect" impacts of inter-school collaboration on school improvement is stronger. Many studies find positive impacts in areas such as staff professional development and career opportunities, the sharing of good practice and innovation, workload reductions and organizational and financial efficiency. Other areas where collaboration has been shown to have a positive influence include a shift towards "more learning-oriented and enquiry-based cultures in schools" and the facilitating of curriculum development and problem solving.

The report concludes that schools are "generally very positive about inter-school collaboration and, in the vast majority of cases, can see the benefits of engaging in such activity, suggesting there is an appetite for inter-school collaboration within the system." That conclusion is supported by a Department for Education survey of 720 academies showing that since they became an academy, 60 percent of schools had collaborated with other schools in more formal partnerships and that another 11 percent intended to do so (Cirin, 2014). Having an appetite for such collaboration, however, is not the same thing as documenting that collaboration leads to better schools and improved student outcomes, or under what conditions they would do so.

Other evidence on the potential effectiveness of school collaboration comes from research on academy chains, which includes both those with the formal structure of MATs and those that are less formally structured. Noting that little analysis had been done to test policy makers' belief in the potential for academy chains to improve the performance of struggling schools and disadvantaged pupils, the Sutton Trust commissioned an empirical study of chains of secondary schools in 2014 and a follow-up study in 2015. Both studies focused on the performance of disadvantaged pupils, defined as those who had been eligible for free school meals in any year between years 6 and 11.[17] The first study examined student outcome data for schools in 31 chains for the years 2010-2013, while the second study extended the analysis through 2014.

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[17] A few of the chains in the chain sample included primary schools but only secondary schools were included in the school analysis sample that required that an academy be part of a chain for three years. Primary school academies were not started until 2011.

The studies make very clear the complexities of comparing outcomes for academy chains relative to those for mainstream schools given that the chains differ one from another along multiple dimensions: number of member academies, level of schooling (primary, secondary or some combination), types of schools (sponsored vs. converter academies, and in a few cases independent schools), formality of the relationship between schools within the chain, clarity of the shared vision, years of experience with school improvement, and geographic concentration of the schools. Nonetheless the authors have done a careful, but not causal, analysis in which they compare outcomes, including improvement rates, for disadvantaged secondary school pupils in each of 31 chains to those of disadvantaged students in all mainstream schools. Their focus on disadvantaged students reflects the main goal of sponsored academies, namely to improve the outcomes for disadvantaged students.

The major finding of both studies is that the chains vary greatly in their success with disadvantaged students, whether measured in terms of levels or rates of improvement of student outcomes relative to maintained schools. For example, the 2014 study reported that only 9 of the 31 chains performed better than mainstream schools on a weighted measure of secondary school outcome measures in 2013. Although a somewhat higher share (18 out of 31 chains) featured somewhat higher relative rates of pupil improvement between 2011 and 2013, the variation across chains remains the dominant conclusion. The authors identify a few chains, including the Harris Federation and Ark Schools, that achieve impressive outcomes for such children against a range of measures, thus demonstrating "the transformational impact on life chances that can be made." The authors also report, however, that "a far larger group of low-performing chains are achieving results that are not improving and may be harming the prospects of their disadvantaged students." Moreover, in their 2015 study, the researchers find that the contrast between the best and worst chains had increased since the 2014 study. The authors noted that this subsequent analysis "provides further evidence that sponsorship is not a panacea for improvement" and urged the government to "take a more open-minded approach to school improvement."

Evidence from Ofsted confirms the existence of some very weak MATs. Although the Government has not empowered Ofsted to rate the quality of MATs as it does with schools or local authorities, Ofsted convinced the government to allow it to write reviews for some of the weaker MATs, and it has done so for seven of them. The resulting six-page review letters, which, like all Ofsted reports, are publicly available, are based on focused reviews of a limited number of the schools within the MAT, telephone interviews with leaders of others, and discussions with the trust's leaders. We provide a flavor of the findings for five of the MATs in the appendix. The five entries provide a feel for the variety of the MATs in terms of size, type of school served, growth patterns, and, importantly, their geographic ranges. Significantly, none of them are geographically confined to a single local authority. The 67 Academies Enterprise Trust (AET) schools, for example, are spread throughout England, and the 19 CfBT schools are located in 12 local authorities in 5 Ofsted regions. The illustrative summary comments from

Ofsted raise clear concerns about the failure of these MATs to provide the necessary supports to their academies and to challenge them to raise pupil achievement. Although some of them are showing some signs of improvement, mainly after a change in leadership, Ofsted is generally critical of their overall performance.

Our interview with Steve Munby, a board member of the academy chain that sponsored the CfBT MAT, confirmed that it was ineffective. Indeed he uses it as an example of how *not* to set up an academy chain. A good one, he said, must be built around an education vision and a geographical focus; theirs, he said, lacked a coherent strategy and was too diverse geographically. Likewise, he said an effective chain requires sufficient money at the center to make it work, leaders of theirs did not understand what was involved in school improvement and, as a result, charged the member schools far too little (0.75 percent of the state funding).The CfBT MAT eventually raised the school contribution to 5 percent and brought in new leadership. Asked about the government's proposal to require MATs, Munby indicated that he would have preferred that the government invest in leadership and then promote informal collaborations in the form of local federations of schools. [18]

At the other extreme from the MATs reviewed by Ofsted is ARK, a chain of 34 schools with a strong national reputation that was singled out by the Sutton Trust for doing an excellent job with its disadvantaged pupils. In an interview, Lucy Heller, the head of ARK, emphasized that the task of turning around low-performing schools is "really tough." She estimated that of the 34 ARK schools, "about half are excellent." She said that the organization's success is grounded in a culture of shared mission, including a strong collegial sense among school principals and middle-level managers. Central to the ARK operating model is the practice of sending teams of specialists and others into each school twice each term. These visits, she said, are designed not as "inspections" but as "conversations" that will lead to school improvement. Heller emphasized that providing effective support at the network level is both essential and expensive. While the visits themselves are relatively cheap, the follow-up coaching and support, which is more extensive than is typically provided by local authorities to maintained schools, can be costly. ARK's central budget is funded by a 4.5 percent levy on each academy plus some philanthropic funding. Heller noted that while the latter accounts for only 2.5 percent of the overall budget, it represents a far greater share of the central office expenditures. Additional factors in ARK's success, she added, include controlled expansion, with careful attention to the needs of newly added academies, and geographical concentration, with academies clustered in four regions.

In short, there is no strong and compelling evidence to support the three arguments – early success, innovation, and cross-school collaboration—that an academised system supported

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[18] Similar views appear in his think/action piece. Munby and Fullan (2016).

by MATs will constitute a strong education system. Some academies and MATs may be effective, but others will undoubtedly be weak. Moreover, for many of the reasons we highlight in Section V below, full academisation with MATs is a risky strategy to pursue. One might argue, as the Government does, that while a fully academised system may have its problems, it is still likely to be better than the existing system organized around local authorities. The validity of this argument depends largely on judgments about how effective the existing system has been and how strong it is likely to be in the future. That is the issue to which we now turn.

IV. <u>How valid are concerns about the limitations of local authorities?</u>

Although the white paper begins by acknowledging that the English education system had made significant progress during the previous five years under the Coalition government, it notes with concern that this progress was not evenly spread across the country (hence the title: *Educational Excellence Everywhere*). Moreover, it argues that even if local authorities as a group have been relatively successful to date, they will not be able to handle additional demands that will confront them in the future. In this section we look at both concerns.

Our focus is on primary schools because by 2015 more than three-fifths of all secondary schools were academies operating outside of the purview of their local authorities. It would be inappropriate to attribute the success or failure of secondary school students or schools to the local authorities where they happened to be located. Although some primary schools were already academies by 2015, the percentage was far lower – only 15 percent. In sum, the policy debate about the move to academies is really a debate about the future of primary schools.

Is the overall system failing to deliver student outcomes?

Before we turn to the level and variation in the effectiveness of the country's 152 local authorities, we briefly document the patterns and recent trends in outcomes for primary school pupils across the country's eight regions. Table 2 reports the percentages of primary school students who achieved at level 4 or above in math, reading and writing in all state-funded schools within each region for the years 2012 through 2015. The panel shows that the performance of primary school students has been rising both in England as a whole and in each of the regions. That improvement in pupil achievement is important because it belies the argument that declining pupil performance – either overall or in some parts of the country – justifies a major structural change of the system.

The table also illustrates, however, that the proficiency rates do, in fact, vary across regions, from a low of 78 percent proficient in Yorkshire and the Humber in the north to a high of 84 percent in London. The high proficiency rate in London has been noted elsewhere and has been referred to as the "London effect." [19] Significantly, the rates are similar in the two parts of London despite the fact that the Inner London boroughs have far higher proportions of low-income pupils than the wealthier Outer London boroughs**.**

Table 2. Percent of students scoring level 4 or above on math and reading on KS2 tests by region, all state funded primary schools

	2012	2013	2014	2015	Change (2012-2015)
England	75	76	79	80	5
North East	75	78	79	82	7
North West	76	77	80	81	5
Yorkshire *	72	73	76	78	6
East Midlands	75	75	78	79	4
West Midlands	74	74	77	79	5
East of England	73	74	78	79	6
London	77	79	82	84	7
Inner London	78	79	82	84	6
Outer London	77	78	82	84	7
South East	75	76	79	81	6
South West	75	76	79	80	5

*Includes the Humber

The variation across regions emerges more starkly when we shift the focus to the performance of disadvantaged students (defined as those eligible for free school meals) and to the performance gaps between them and their more advantaged counterparts. Table 3 shows that proficiency rates for FSM students are below 64 percent in 5 regions – East of England, South East, South West, Yorkshire, and East Midlands – in contrast to 76 percent in London. The biggest within region-gaps between FSM and other students of 22 percentage points are in the East of England and the Southeast and are more than twice the gap in London.

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[19] For a discussion of the London Effect, see Ladd and Fiske (2016).

Table 3. FSM eligible pupils vs. other pupils, by region
Reading writing and math, achieving at level 4 or above,
2015

	FSM eligible	all other	gap
England	66	83	17
North East	67	86	19
North West	67	84	17
Yorkshire *	62	82	20
East Midlands	63	82	19
West Midlands	66	82	16
East of England	60	82	22
London	76	86	10
Inner London	78	86	8
Outer London	73	86	13
South East	61	83	22
South West	62	82	20

Once again, while the variations across regions and types of students within regions are cause for policy concern they do not by themselves provide a strong justification for moving to a full academy system for primary schools. In some areas – particularly in London – even disadvantaged pupils succeed at relatively high rates under the current system of local authorities. Thus, a closer look at the effectiveness of individual authorities is needed.
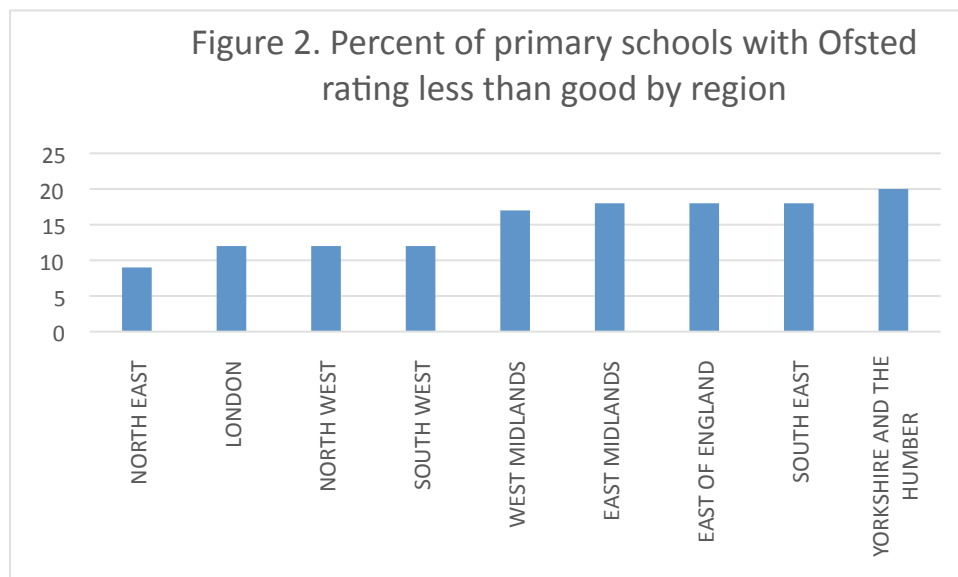
How effective – or ineffective – are the local authorities?

It is tempting to measure the effectiveness of local authorities by the outcomes of their pupils. We do not take that approach here, however, because it would confound the effectiveness of schools with the effects of family background. Instead, we use a measure over which local authorities have more influence, namely the quality of their schools as reported by Ofsted.

Ofsted inspectors visit all schools periodically, write narrative reports and assign a number grade to the school. The numbers are 1 for an outstanding school, 2 for a good school, 3 for a school in need of improvement, and 4 for a school that is deemed to be inadequate. These summary measures signal the review team's conclusions about the quality of school leadership, instruction, and student performance. Because not all schools are inspected in any given year, we rely here on the most recent inspection rating for each state-funded school in the local authority, including the academies. The proportion of schools with ratings below good are of most interest

because those are the schools to which the local authorities pay most attention and for which they are most responsible for school improvement. Such ratings are also used as an excuse to force schools to become academies.
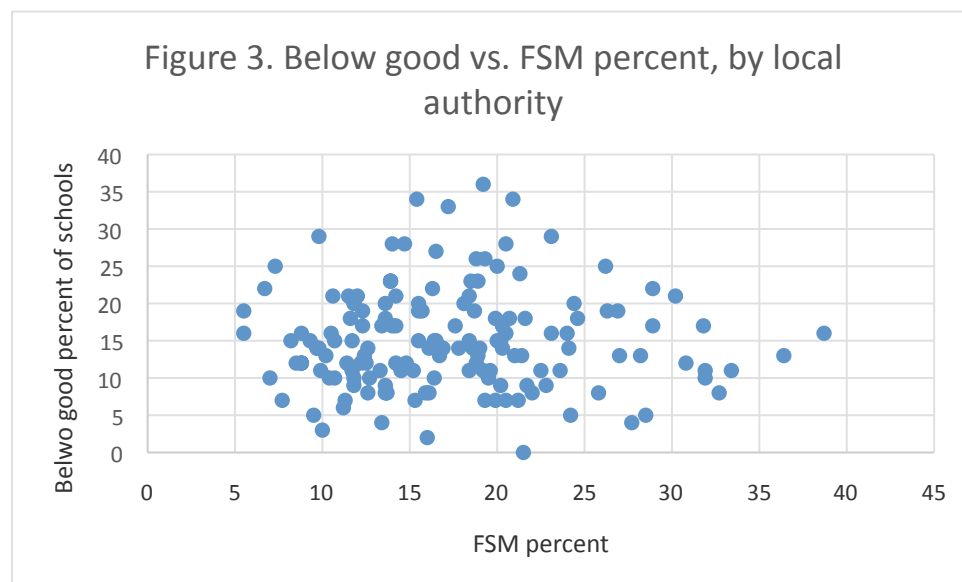
In 2015, about 15 percent of the primary schools throughout England were rated below good, with 14 percent of these rated as needing improvement and only 1 percent as inadequate. Stated differently, 85 percent of the English primary schools were deemed good or better. While it would, of course, be desirable for that percentage to be even higher, it is hard to argue that an 85 success rate represents a failing system in need of drastic overhaul or replacement. Moreover, it is notable that the percentage of weak schools varies across English Regions (with no distinction here between Inner and Outer London). As shown in figure 2, in which the regions are portrayed in order of their in effectiveness, the percentages range from 9 percent in the Northeast to 20 percent in Yorkshire and the Humber. Thus primary age students in some regions are more than twice as likely as those in the Northeast to attend a school that is

Figure 2. Percent of primary schools with Ofsted rating less than good by region

operating below the standard of good. Interestingly, the two regions with the *lowest* percentages of low-quality schools – the Northeast and London – are those with the *highest* percentages of students eligible for free school meals. Based on this relationship, variation in student disadvantage across regions does not appear to explain the variation in LA effectiveness.

As would be expected given their smaller size, the variation in Ofsted ratings across local authorities is much greater than the variation across regions. The percentage of schools rated below good ranges from 2 to 36 percent, with 33 of the 152 local authorities featuring rates of 20 percent or more. Consistent with the regional pattern, the pattern at the LA level is not correlated with the percentage of students who are eligible for free school meals (see figure 3).
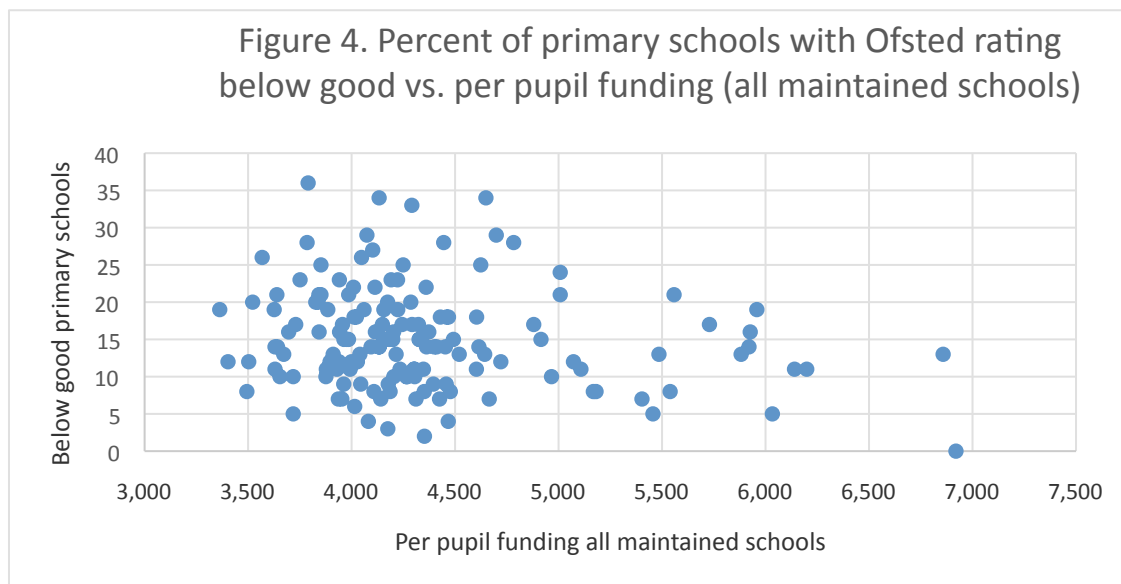
Indeed, the LAs with the highest proportions of students eligible for FSMs are among those with the lower percentages of weak schools. The graph illustrates that the LAs with the highest proportions of low-quality schools are those in which about 20 percent of their students are eligible for FSMs. These data reiterate that high proportions of needy pupils need not result in low-quality schools. Low-quality schools are more likely to be associated with low-quality leadership at the LA level.[20]

Figure 3. Below good vs. FSM percent, by local authority

For historical and other reasons, including higher salaries for teachers in London faced with the city's high cost of living, the amount of per-pupil funding the central government provides to individual local authorities differs widely. Figure 4 depicts the relationship between the per-pupil funding each LA receives for all maintained schools and the percent of its primary schools rated below standard. As can be seen from the variation along the horizontal axis, the funding varies from less than £3,500 per pupil to close to £7,000. The figure provides some evidence of a correlation between funding and effectiveness in that the LAs with more funding tend to have lower fractions of below-standard schools. At the same time, the relationship is not causal. Moreover, given that LAs with similar amounts of per pupil funding exhibit significant

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[20] The four least-effective authorities – in which about a third or more of their primary schools are rated below good – are Doncaster, the Isle of Wight, Bradford and Medway**.** We provide a few conclusions from the Ofsted report on Bradford here. Ofsted concludes that the local authority's support and challenge for leadership has not been effective. Although school-to-school partnerships are well established in Bradford, until recently, the local authority provided little strategic leadership to, or quality assurance of, these partnerships. With a number of new appointments, however, Ofsted concludes that there is new direction in the local authority and a cause for optimism.

variation in the quality of their schools, funding is clearly not the whole story. Nonetheless, the fact that the lowest performing local authorities (defined for this purpose as those in which more than a third of their schools are weak) have far less funding than some of the higher funded LAs suggests that the central government could well bear some responsibility for the low quality of their schools.

Figure 4. Percent of primary schools with Ofsted rating below good vs. per pupil funding (all maintained schools)

We conclude that while some local authorities are decidedly weak, it is hard to make the case that the basic system of local authorities is failing. Moreover, some local authorities, including many in London, have done an outstanding job of assuring high-quality schools for most of their primary school students.

Hence, the case for reducing further the role of the local authorities must be based not on their past performance but on their expected future performance.

How well suited are the LAs to meet future demands on the system?

The case for reducing further the power of local authorities appears to have been developed most fully in a 2014 policy report for a leading London think tank, the Policy Exchange (Briggs and Simon, 2014).[21] The report, entitled *Primary Focus: The next stage of improvement for primary schools in England*, provides a strong data-informed conceptual

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[21] One of the authors of the report is Jonathan Simons, who formerly served as Head of Education in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit under the administrations of both Gordon Brown and David Cameron.

foundation for the white paper's call for a shift away from local authorities toward full academisation at the primary level. Consistent with the data we have just shown, the authors begin by acknowledging that the system of local authorities was not failing and, in fact, as measured by the share of schools rated good or better, had been improving over the past decade. They then argue that whatever their past successes, local authorities are not up to the more challenging tasks facing primary schools going forward.

The authors refer to several new challenges for the system, all of which were in the works before the publication of the new white paper. One is pressure from a new curriculum intended to make English students more competitive with their peers in other countries. Attached to the new curriculum is a new assessment system that individual schools will be required either to develop on their own or to obtain from other schools. Another is a rise in the bar for what pupils will be expected to achieve as they leave primary school at age 11. In 2014, 60 percent of the pupils were expected to achieve at level four (the measure of proficiency), but by 2016 the expectation had increased to 85 percent. Moreover, starting in 2016, results are to be expressed as a scale score out of 100 and comparisons provided across schools, which will put more pressure on individual schools. Given the magnitude of these changes and the speed with which they are being introduced, the authors predict that many primary schools will have difficulty adjusting to them.

In addition, the two-tier system of local authorities and academies will no longer be viable given that these changes are occurring in a context in which local authorities are expected to have significantly less funding and less managerial capacity. The government has announced its intention to reduce overall funding for schools in the near future (see discussion of funding below in section V), with one recent study predicting a 7 percent reduction in inflation-adjusted funding for schools through 2019 (Belfield and Sibieta, 2016). That alone would create a problem for local authorities, but their plight is exacerbated by the fact that each academy keeps its share of the overall pot of school improvement funds. Thus, as the number of academies increase, the local authorities receive less funding for school improvement services.

Indeed, local authorities are already finding it difficult to attract and maintain the high-quality personnel required for them to support the maintained schools effectively, and many schools are also finding it increasingly difficult to recruit high-quality teachers or headteachers. The white paper appears to expect the academies to lure talented educators away from the LAs and encourages them to do so (White Paper 2016, Section 5:31).

In light of these new pressures and the outlook for the declining capacity of local authorities, the authors of the Policy Exchange study concluded that a major change in governance was required to avoid an imminent crisis in the primary sector. Their proposed solution is the one that emerged in the white paper: forced academisation of all primary schools (as well as the rest of the secondary schools) along with the expectation that most of the new academies will join MATs. But given the fact that academies will face many of the same

financial and other pressures as maintained schools, it is unclear how making all schools into academies will solve the problem. In effect, the proposal involves the scrapping of a system that was generally working well but might not be able to cope with the new pressures that the Government was imposing on it, and replacing it with a new and basically untested system to address the greater challenges to come.

It is far too early to evaluate the effects of the proposed system on student outcomes, but it is not too early to raise some thorny pragmatic questions about whether the new structure can be implemented and managed. It is to these questions that we now turn our attention.

V. Implementing the new vision: Challenges and problems

In the course of carrying out research for this paper, we encountered a good deal of skepticism among policy makers and others about the feasibility of implementing the vision for English education spelled out in the white paper. As a consequence, we began asking respondents to suggest one or two adjectives that they would use to describe the plan. Some of our sources, cognizant of the general direction of changes in government education policy over the last few years, suggested "predictable." Others focused on the plan's boldness and suggested terms ranging from "ambitious" to "overzealous." Still others, noting that the white paper called for replacing a well-established system with one that has never been tried, opted for "risky" or "reckless." A few respondents wondered if the designers had really thought through the consequences of what they were doing and suggested "shambles," "dog's breakfast," and "a disaster waiting to happen." Significantly the 2013 Academies Commission itself had highlighted a set of practical obstacles to implementing the vision inherent in the white paper. To these challenges we now turn.

We highlight three specific types of problems. First is the challenge of finding enough sponsors and MATs for all struggling schools, as is required by the white paper. Second is the huge task of establishing and centrally managing a new system – one that requires making the nascent system of Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) workable and transparent and developing and implementing a new system of school funding. Finally, there are the challenges faced by the local authorities in carrying out their residual responsibilities given their increasingly limited authority and funding.

Finding high-quality sponsors for all struggling schools

A major initial task facing the regional schools commissioners is to fulfill the requirement that all struggling schools become sponsored academies. A sponsor appoints the majority of the

members and directors of the academy trust and thereby has a large degree of control in designing and implementing the strategic vision and improvement plan for the school. A sponsor can control an individual academy or a group of academies in the form of a MAT. Existing MATs can serve as a sponsor for a struggling school that becomes an academy.

 In their 2014 report for the Policy Exchange supporting a full-blown academy system at the primary level, the authors note that "under a fully academised sector, many more sponsors will be required to lead the growth of academy chains"(Briggs and Simon, 2014, p.11). Based on data showing that a typical MAT has 7.5 schools, the authors point out that the 3,358 primary schools likely to be classified as failing in 2016 would require 448 sponsors, or more than double the number of existing academy chains at the primary level. No one knows exactly how many sponsors would be required to run a fully academised system, but the number is certainly in four figures. Based on the 7.5 school average, the country's roughly 20,000 schools would require 2,227 sponsors if all became parts of MATs of the average size. The Policy Exchange report concludes: "This report considers it highly unlikely that the Department for Education is in a position to find sufficient sponsors, let alone then broker all the relationships between them and failing schools" (Briggs and Simon, 2014,p.25).

 The regional schools commissioners, who are charged with finding sponsors for struggling schools, essentially have three options for doing so. The first is to emulate the approach that the Labour government followed when it began setting up academies in 2002 – recruiting wealthy individuals and charities that were able and willing to invest 2 million pounds and to become sponsors of academies taking over struggling schools. Subsequent sponsors also included religious organizations, independent schools, and businesses. The Department for Education long ago ran out of sponsors prepared to come up with such sizable initial investments, and it has relaxed the up-front financial requirements. Even so, relatively few businesses or additional charities now seem to be willing to take on the challenge of sponsoring an individual academy or a MAT.

 A second option for the commissioners is to turn to existing MATs and convince them to expand by taking on one or more struggling schools. As we have seen from the Sutton Trust studies, however, many of the existing chains, including some of the largest ones, have been quite ineffective in educating their disadvantaged pupils. Moreover, many of the more effective MATs, such as ARK, managed their expansion in a slow and deliberate way, an approach that now looks like a luxury given the projected need for new sponsors in the short run.

 The third and final option for RSCs is to encourage more strong primary schools to become academies (unless they already are) and to establish or join a MAT in order to take on the task of sponsoring and turning around struggling schools. This option seems to be emerging as the commissioners' primary strategy for finding enough sponsors to make the new system work.

But what are the incentives for strong primary schools to convert to academy status and to establish or join a MAT in the first place?

The basic argument for convincing successful schools to join a MAT is that it is becoming increasingly difficult for individual schools, whether they be maintained or academies, to survive as independent entities. In the face of declining budgets, especially in the area of school improvement, they are under pressure to seek ways of sharing costs and resources with other schools, especially in the non-teaching areas. As discussed above, such pressures will increase as the government forces schools to cope with a new national curriculum, assessment changes and new scales. As groups of schools, the argument goes, MATs are in a position to provide economies of scale and to offer more professional opportunities to prospective teachers. For many governing boards and head teachers, the relevant question may not be "whether" their school will join a MAT but "when." Joining a MAT becomes increasingly attractive in a climate where many other schools are doing so and such status will become mandatory in 2022.

There are, however, some downside risks to academies joining a MAT. Academies by definition enjoy a great deal of operational autonomy, and they surrender a good deal of this independence when they join a MAT – unless, of course, they are the school running the trust. Moreover, once a school joins a MAT it no longer exists as a separate legal entity. The decision to join a MAT is irrevocable even if the MAT turns out to be dysfunctional. The principal hope for an academy involved in a bad relationship with its MAT is that the relevant regional commissioner will move it to another MAT. For such reasons many academies have preferred to remain independent and to join less restrictive alliances.

The related question is what incentives there are for either a new academy or successful MATs to take on the challenge of managing struggling schools. Finding a sufficient number of successful schools willing to shoulder this responsibility is critical to making the new system work. Department for Education leaders profess confidence that they can pull this off. "We can do the marriages," one official told us. "We have 700 or 800 schools ready to take on failing schools." As an added incentive, he said, "We pay them with upfront grants to deal with the issue."

The optimism is based on the following types of arguments. Taking over management of a struggling school may be a way to attract and retain future leaders in search of professional development and new challenges, and the collegial atmosphere of a MAT could appeal to leaders who might otherwise be nervous about risking their reputations by involvement with a struggling school. Building and running a large and successful MAT can be a feather in the cap of ambitious administrators eager to demonstrate their managerial capabilities. Moreover, since MATs often compete with each other to be seen as successful enterprises, there may be good reasons to sign up schools that are likely candidates for turnaround success before another chain

comes in and does so. Working with low-performing schools is also seen as a way of courting favor with regional commissioners, gaining a seat at the table for policy discussions and perhaps even earning more positive ratings from Ofsted, which looks favorably on successful schools that support weaker ones. On the other hand, a MAT's affiliation with a struggling school could easily damage the reputation of other member schools and even the perceived effectiveness of the MAT itself.

In practice, the RSCs will inevitably have to fall back on other means of persuading MATs to take on struggling schools. One commissioner told us that he and his colleagues rely primarily on "moral" arguments, including the convictions that every child deserves to have access to a good school and that all schools have a stake in the overall success of the education system. Another respected educational researcher commented, "Most chains are charitably motivated. They don't need the money. Their leaders came into education to make a difference." Whether such moral arguments are sufficient to sustain the huge new system envisioned by the white paper, however, is not at all clear.

Can the system be managed effectively from London?

One fundamental question raised by critics of the government's new plans is whether such a massive new system can be effectively managed from London. Writing in 2013 and anticipating this question, the Academies Commission cited witnesses who had warned about "the difficulties the Secretary of State would have in managing over 20,000 schools in England."

The white paper assumes that the new system will for the most part be "self-governing" and thus will not have to be managed in a traditional sense from Whitehall. Indeed, in the foreword to its report, the Commission declared, "If the Secretary of State has to manage any schools, the academies programme will have failed. Schools manage themselves – and never more so than when they become academies." Such optimism, it acknowledged, presumes that there will be "enough support and challenge in the system, and enough checks and balances, for academies or groups of academies to be able to use the independence they have gained professionally and with moral purpose." An official at the Department for Education told us, "We are now funding 5,500 academies. We have a system in place." He added that the government will have to pay attention to no more than 6 or 7 percent of schools – "which is eminently manageable."

Nevertheless, no one disputes that setting up and overseeing the new state education system envisioned in the white paper – however "decentralized" and "self-governing" it is in theory – will be a challenging task. Major concerns fall into two broad categories.

Expectations for the Regional Schools Commissioners

As a starter, the proposed governance system requires the development of a new layer of bureaucracy resting in between the central government in London and the thousands of MATs and academies throughout the country. The key element of the new structure is the network of Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs).[22] These are civil servants obligated to carry out directions from the national government but are instructed to make decisions in consultation with groups of head teachers in their regions. The country is divided into eight new regions with one RSC for each region and a head RSC to oversee the system.[23] For all practical purposes, the nine commissioners take over many of the quality control responsibilities previously carried out by the local education authorities, albeit on a regional rather than a local basis and in a less hands-on manner. The commissioners' primary task is to convert failing schools to sponsored academies and to serve as brokers to form and expand MATs. Once these networks are in place, the commissioners are charged with assuring that the system runs smoothly. They are specifically barred from directly offering school improvement services; instead, their remit is to help academies and MATs find outside providers for such services.

There is no English precedent for the RSCs, so no one knows exactly how many staff will be needed to help them carry out their responsibilities. Government officials maintain that the staff of the nine RSCs will be much smaller than the cumulative staffs of the local authorities that they will be replacing. For one thing, they will have little if any interaction with successful schools other than to try to persuade them to sponsor struggling schools, and they have no responsibility for carrying out necessary school improvement services other than to recruit MATs to do so. Critics, however, respond that since LA staffs have responsibilities in areas other than education, the relevant comparison is with the number of LA officials working directly with schools. Moreover, it remains to be seen how many additional staff will be required when, as expected, RSCs will also be given the task of working with "coasting schools" that, while not failing, are not living up to their potential.

Critics are also quick to argue that since it has never been tried before, the emerging RSC system leaves many questions unanswered, starting with lines of accountability. RSCs are civil servants who report to the Secretary of State for Education, but the 2016 report of the House of Commons Education Committee entitled *The Role of Regional Schools Commissioners* noted that because they have responsibilities and powers that extend beyond the scope of many other civil service roles, RSCs are candidates "for a more direct form of accountability than would be the case for other senior civil servants." (40) But the form of this accountability is unclear. For example, what is their responsibility to the academy trusts or boards of the MATs that they

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[22] In anticipation of the need for a regional governance structure to oversee the growing number of academies, the RSCs were initially established in 2014.

[23] These regions do not overlap with the Ofsted regions and were designed to split London up so that the areas around London could benefit from the success of many London schools.

supervise and how will they relate to Ofsted? In its response to this committee report, the government asserted that "the schools landscape is continuing to evolve and that the role of the RSCs will also evolve" (p, 1). It promised that "the level of awareness and understanding of the RSCs' role will grow over time." A related issue, as discussed below, is the lack of transparency in the way that RSCs operate.

Challenges related to funding

The white paper also calls for a new national educational funding system. The key elements of the proposed change are the direct funding of each individual school by the central government and "fair" funding for every school, where fair funding refers to the fact that the resources available for each school are matched to the challenges they face. This proposal would replace the Dedicated Schools Grant and Education Services Grant that are currently provided to each local authority, and it would further the goal of a fully academised system by breaking all linkages between school funding and the local authority.[24] With the local authorities no longer responsible for any schools there is no justification for schools facing similar challenges in different areas to be funded at different levels.[25]

The government proposes four building blocks for the new formula: a basic amount of funding per pupil weighted by level of schooling; funding for additional pupil needs associated with factors such as economic disadvantage, low prior attainment, and being a non-native English speaker; a lump sum of extra funding for small schools in sparsely populated areas; and an adjustment for schools in London with high teacher labor costs (White Paper, 2016,section 8). The Department for Education is currently in the process of consulting with stakeholders about the precise elements of the new formula, so it is not yet clear what the parameters of the new system will be.[26]

Average per-pupil funding currently differs across LAs for three main reasons: First, the LAs in London receive higher grants because they face above-average costs in hiring teachers. Second, LAs with higher proportions of disadvantaged pupils typically receive greater funding, largely because of the significant growth in funding during the Labour years that targeted funds toward LAs with large proportions of disadvantaged pupils. According to a recent study, these two actors account for about 75 to 80 percent of the variation across LAs (Belfield and Sibieta, 2016) depending on how disadvantage is measured. The rest of the variation is attributable to a

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[24] The government's justification for the proposal is provided in Department for Education, "Schools and high needs funding reform," March 2016.

[25] Even without academisation a case could be made for a reform of this type to rationalize the funding across local authorities.

[26] Instead of incorporating the special grant for disadvantaged students, called the pupil premium, that was introduced by the Coalition Government in 2011 into the new funding formula, the government chose to continue it as a separate funding element. One advantage of that strategy is that the government can make sure schools use that grant for the intended purpose.

variety of factors, some of which reflect pre-2006 patterns of funding that were carried over when the current funding system of dedicated schools grants was established. Moreover, current funding levels differ across schools within LAs, because of differences in how the LAs choose to allocate funds across schools, with some favoring secondary schools more or less favorably than primary schools compared to others.

As would be the case with any funding change, there are likely to be winners and losers. Among the likely losers are schools in many of the Inner London boroughs that now receive additional funding that more than compensates for their higher salary costs.[27] Along with any adjustments across local authorities, significant redistributions of funds within LAs are also likely as the national formula replaces the LA-specific formulas (Belfield and Sibieta, 2016). The changes in this context are likely to be particularly difficult to implement because they must be accomplished within the context of declining overall schools budgets. The national budget for education is scheduled to decline by 7 percent in real per-pupil terms through the end of the current Parliament in 2019-20 (and 8 percent if rising pension costs are factored in). Hence the government is not in a position to ease the funding changes through holding schools harmless. The net effect will inevitably be that large numbers of schools will end up with less per-pupil funding in real terms.

These reductions matter because they are scheduled to occur simultaneously with the conversion of large numbers of schools to academies. Although the government claims it has set aside funding for the legal costs of conversion and plans to phase in the formula-related changes over a two-year period, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the introduction of the new funding formula will be extremely disruptive. In addition, it could be far more costly than expected, and, at worst, it might turn out that it will not be feasible to implement the formula at all.

Even if a new national funding formula is successfully developed, it is not clear that the government, through its Education Funding Agency (EFA), will have the capacity to administer it in a transparent and fair manner. With full academisation, the EFA, which has struggled with the implementation of funding for 152 local authorities and close to 4,500 academies, will be responsible for 20,000 schools. Clear evidence of the nature of the challenge emerges from the 2016 National Auditor's report on the 2014-15 financial statement of the Department for Education, which included financial statements for all the academies. Its adverse opinion "indicates that he [the National Auditor] considers the level of error and uncertainty in the statements to be both material and pervasive. He has also qualified his regularity opinion because the Department has exceeded three of its expenditure limits authorized by Parliament" (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2016).

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[27] Consistent with this prediction, we heard concerns about forthcoming funding cuts from many of the local London officials we interviewed.

Problems associated with the loss of local control.

A third set of problems and challenges arises because of the limited tools now available to local authorities to carry out their residual responsibilities and, given the fragmentation associated with the system of academies and MATS, a lack of clarity about what channels there will be for local input into education decisions.

Ability of local authorities to carry out their residual responsibilities

Local authorities still have three residual responsibilities under the new plan: assuring a place for every child, looking after vulnerable children, and serving as champions for children and families. As already described, the operating capacity of LAs has been substantially weakened in recent years and will be eviscerated further as funds are diverted to the growing number of academies. Local authorities are already finding it difficult to recruit capable staff members, and the challenges of doing so are likely to increase under the new rules.

Assuring a place for every child

Assuring a place for every child requires, first of all, that there be a sufficient number of schools and classrooms to serve all children in light of projected demographic and related trends. Local authorities faced with growing populations can encourage academies to build or to expand their student roles, but they have no power to force them to do so. Establishing a new school is not an option because the only way to qualify for funds to do so is by creating a new academy, something that local authorities are not empowered to do. Convincing interested parties to set up new schools is particularly difficult in the rural coastal areas with substantial disadvantaged populations.

A second challenge relates to admissions. Parents seeking to find a school for their child have long had the right to list their preferences for schools, but someone has to make the assignments to specific schools. While the local authority can carry out this function for its maintained schools, academies function as their own admissions authorities subject to their funding agreements with the Secretary of State. Local authorities thus have no power to compel academies to take a particular child. Interviews with leaders of local authorities suggest that, in practice, there is often room for negotiations and that some, but by no means all, MATs will respond favorably to such requests. In many situations, however, local authorities have few options other than to appeal to their regional schools commissioner to put pressure on the academy in question. In extreme cases, the Department for Education can withdraw funding from a school that refuses to expand. Clearly the admissions system envisioned in the white paper has significant flaws.

The new system also raises equity concerns, especially with regard to the admission of students to oversubscribed schools. The 2012 Admissions Code to which all schools are bound

stipulates that schools cannot interview prospective children or their parents, nor can they enact policies that would favor more privileged families. However, the 2013 Academies Commission heard testimony suggesting that some academies are finding ways to get around these provisions by holding social events for prospective families, requesting additional information, or otherwise complicating the admissions process (65-67). To be sure, the problem of selective admissions is not restricted to academies alone. The big concern, though, is that "the growth of academies may entrench rather than mitigate social inequalities" (63).[28]

The white paper promises to enact changes designed to "make it easier for parents to navigate the admissions system" (4.61) as well as to "ensure complaints and admissions procedures are clear and fair for parents and children" (4.55). How this might work out remains to be seen.

Looking out for vulnerable children

The white paper specifies that local authorities will continue to bear responsibility for "ensuring the needs of vulnerable pupils are met." Such duties include identifying and addressing children with special education needs (SEN), finding places for such children in appropriate schools, and in some cases even acting as the "corporate parent" for them. Carrying out such responsibilities frequently involves coordinating school policies with those of health and other social agencies.

In seeking to serve the needs of SEN students as well as those with behavioral, emotional and social difficulties (BESD), local authorities have traditionally worked with their head teachers. If necessary, a local authority can direct a maintained school (even one that is full) to take an unplaced vulnerable child. But, as noted in the previous section, local authorities have no such power over academies; it resides with the Secretary of State for Education. Since enactment of the Academies Act of 2010, all funding arrangements for academies must include details of their "SEN obligations." But, as noted above with regard to the difficulty of placing children generally, it is by no means clear that all academies take this responsibility seriously, and it is not known whether this policy even applies to earlier academies. Some academy chains are setting up alternative schools for their SEN students, which may or may not be a positive development.

Serving as a champion for children and families

Finally, the white paper states that local authorities must continue to act as "champions for all parents and families." It lists a number of specific responsibilities, including supporting parents in navigating social support agencies, setting high standards for pupils and, where necessary "calling for action from the Regional Schools commissioner to tackle underperformance." What this mandate means and how it can be implemented are huge

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[28] Research by West et al. (2011) shows that some popular schools and not just academies are setting and using criteria to select and exclude pupils. Also see Allen and West (2011).

questions. As one local educational official told us, "I don't know how to do this without money or power." [29]

Weak channels for local input into education

A school system operating under the supervision of a local education authority has built-in advantages when it comes to being responsive to local issues and needs. Because their mandate is defined in terms of a coherent geographic area, local officials are strategically positioned to understand the overall educational needs of their community, both current and future, and to engage in comprehensive planning. They must be sensitive to competing community priorities, such as the interests of the primary and secondary school sectors, and are in a position to find ways of balancing them. Likewise, they are in a position to coordinate activities within the education sector with those in health, welfare and other social services in the interests of the greater public good. Perhaps most important, a locally organized system fosters accountability by providing a ready contact point for complaints by parents or others about their schools.

The new structure of MATs and RSCs, along with other provisions of the white paper, however, seriously undermine these mechanisms for responsiveness to local concerns.It effectively strips local authorities of responsibility for many of the functions related to articulating overall community needs, coordinated planning, assuring high quality schools for all children in the area, and accountability to parents. The new system is ill equipped to replace authorities as providers of these functions.

MATs by definition have a mandate to look after the interests of more than one school, but their ability to represent the broader interests of a particular community is constricted by the fact that they need not be organized around coherent geographic areas, local or otherwise. While some MATs confine themselves to schools with easy proximity to each other, others – including all of the large chains – oversee member schools in multiple local authorities. In the latter situations, policies are set by distant administrators with little or no knowledge of the local conditions in which an academy operates and no stake in coordinating its operations with other schools in the community. Large MATs inevitably face the temptation to pursue their own interests rather than those of local schools and communities. The prospect of taking directions from a distant administrator with little or no local knowledge may serve as a deterrent for some academies to sign up with a MAT – thus complicating a key task of the regional commissioners.

The major responsibility for assuring that local interests are respected in an academised system falls to the RSCs and their staffs. As already noted, the commissioners themselves are civil servants beholden to the Department for Education, but they clearly have a stake in assuring

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[29] Also see Greany's 2015 analysis of the tensions facing two local authorities in the efforts to champion children within their local areas.

that the academies and MATs in their regions operate in tune with community interests and needs as much as possible. While acknowledging that they themselves operate at a stratospheric level, the commissioners with whom we talked expressed confidence that they can become attuned to local needs through their headteacher advisory boards, teaching schools, Teaching School Alliances and National Leaders of Education. One commissioner explained that he meets at least once every three weeks with his head teacher representatives and, while they are technically advisory, he makes no important decision without them.

The credibility of the RSCs on such matters is undermined by lack of transparency in how they operate. Meetings are not open to the public, and minutes, when published at all, are usually cryptic and long delayed. "We are totally un-transparent," one commissioner told us. "There is a complete reticence to be open. This hurts us." The 2016 Report of the House of Commons Education Committee identified lack of transparency as a problem, including "a paucity of useful information online about the work of Headteacher Boards."

Another major problem with the RSC system has to do with the identification of schools that are on their way down but have not yet reached the point where they are classified by Ofsted as "failing." By intervening early with schools that are struggling, it may be possible to head off major problems down the road. Local education authorities have performed this function within their jurisdictions in the past, and MATs can identify such schools among their own members. But it is unclear who under the new plan is now responsible for keeping an eye out for sliding schools that, with a bit of help, might avoid falling into the "failing" category. Regional schools commissioners are specifically mandated to pay attention to schools that are already failing.

Two other provisions of the white paper raise additional serious concerns from the perspective of local community interests. The most egregious is the proposal that the school land currently owned by a local authority be transferred to the Secretary of State for Education when the school becomes an academy. The white paper rationalizes this proposal "as a way to speed up the process of academy conversion and ensure that land issues do not get in the way of improving schools" (White Paper, 2016, p.56) While this proposal applies only to community schools (which are the majority of locally maintained primary schools) and not to church schools and foundation schools that often own their own land, local officials view this as a serious land grab by the national government and one that they would strongly oppose. Local communities, they argue should have control over school property so that they can make rational planning decisions across land uses.

Finally, there is the crucial matter of reduced accountability to parents or other citizens with school-related issues. In the past, for example, parents dissatisfied with their child's school had ready access to local education authorities or elected local council members. Under the new system, the next levels of appeal might be leadership of a distant MAT, a regional schools commissioner with far-ranging responsibilities, or, as a last resort, the Department for Education. Accountability to parents is complicated by the fact that, according to the white paper, parents

are specifically excluded from membership in the academy boards unless they possess other desired qualifications. Building a formal voice for children and families into the structures is not valued.

A clear sign something has been lost in the push for full academisation is the fact that schools in several London boroughs and elsewhere are banding together to create formal local "partnerships" aimed at promoting area-wide school improvement independently of the new structures being put in place by the Department for Education. These are efforts by local educators and policy makers to preserve many of the school improvement services that local authorities are no longer in a position to sustain. They also serve as a hedge against the possibility that low-performing schools in their area will be taken over by MATs with few local connections and with little interest in preserving the particular ethos of such schools.

In the northwest London borough of Brent, for example, nearly all (93 percent) schools have joined the Brent Schools Partnership (BSP), which describes itself as a school improvement effort carried out "by schools and for schools." The partnership employs a "strategic director" and has assembled a body of consultants who are made available to help schools that wish to purchase their services. It has also designated 12 schools as "specialist centers" that provide expertise to member schools in fields such as math, and it has plans to expand offerings to include teacher recruitment, legal, financial, training of school governors and other services. In Tower Hamlets, a borough within London where there has been strong resistance to MATs among head teachers, about half of schools have provisionally agreed to join the Tower Hamlets Education Partnership that was launched in May 2016. In the strongly Labour Inner London borough of Camden, the Camden Learning Company is scheduled to begin operating in January, 2017.

These emerging partnerships take varied forms. Whereas the Brent Schools Partnership is totally separate from its local authority, others, such as the one in Tower Hamlets, are working closely with the local authority. The relationships between the new partnerships and MATs are also fluid. In some cases, schools belonging to a MAT are free to join a partnership so long as they subscribe to its admissions code and other standards. Whether leaders of the MAT would allow one of their schools to do this is, of course, an open question. Leaders of the Brent Schools Partnership say that they are positioning themselves for the possibility that they would eventually become a MAT in their own right – albeit one deeply rooted in the culture of the borough. The long-run success of partnerships is likely to depend on whether they can obtain buy-in from all or most schools in the community and develop sustainable financial models. It will also be incumbent on successful partnerships to recruit strong leaders who can foster clear visions and find creative ways of providing strong school improvement services.

We interpret the emergence of partnerships as an example of reinventing the wheel by recreating the services that local authorities are no longer in a position to offer. To be sure, local

education authorities have not always lived up to their potential to serve as effective stewards of the educational needs of their communities. Nevertheless, as discussed in Section IV, an education system organized around local authorities has served the country quite well overall, and it is by no means obvious that it needs to be replaced rather than improved. Moreover, reliance on these new partnerships is at best an imperfect way of making up for the loss of community perspectives implicit in the new system. Since many local areas will lack the capacity to set up new partnerships, reliance on them to preserve the local community interest in education is likely to lead to greater geographic inequities across the system.

VI. Conclusions and lessons

The white paper calls for a dramatic change in the structure of schools in England. How much of the proposal Parliament will adopt is still unknown, as is the schedule for implementation. And these uncertainties have been exacerbated by the unexpected change in Conservative Party leadership that followed the vote for Britain to leave the European Union in June 2016.   Nonetheless, the political momentum is clearly on the side of full, or nearly full, academisation of the English school system. Much of the policy groundwork has already been laid at the local and national levels and portions of the plan are in the process of being implemented. Thus, this is a fitting time to draw conclusions about the likely viability and overall effectiveness of the plan.

Given the similarities between English academies and U.S. charter schools, we think three lessons will be relevant to the U.S. and other countries promoting the concept of school autonomy.

Lesson 1. Although they can be helpful in some contexts, academies are an imperfect way to address the challenges faced by struggling schools and their students

It is tempting for some policy makers to argue, as many do, that the fundamental problem facing many struggling schools is that they are hampered by public sector rules and regulations that interfere with their success. If only they were given the flexibility to develop their own solutions to the challenges they face, the argument goes, such schools could be turned around, and student achievement would rise. Hence the white paper's call to "unleash" greatness in the English school system.

The argument for operational autonomy as a reform strategy is plausible in some situations – witness the documented success of the sponsored academies that were promoted by Labour in the early 2000s and the success of some of the academy chains, such as ARK. In both of these cases, however, autonomy was not the only asset that schools had going for them. Recall that the

individuals and charities who served as sponsors of the early Labour academies were firmly committed to the importance of the endeavor and were required to support it by investing large sums of their own money. Likewise ARK benefited from highly effective leadership and strong social commitment. It was also the recipient of philanthropic dollars that helped finance the coaching and support services provided to its individual academies, support that Lucy Heller, the head of ARK, viewed as essential for the success. In short, they had more going for them than freedom from bureaucratic shackles. They had financial and human resources at their disposal that are unlikely to be duplicated across a fully academised system.

Individual success stories must be viewed in a broader context. As highlighted by the Sutton Reports, not all academy chains or their schools have succeeded with their disadvantaged pupils; indeed, some of the lower-performing chains have become even weaker over time. Further, the investigation by Ofsted of the quality of some of the weaker Multi-Academy Trusts (the white paper term for formal chains) clearly documents that academy status alone does not ensure success. To be sure, Ofsted has reviewed only a few MATs and only ones causing concern. Nevertheless, those reviews demonstrate that academy status, even academy status supported by MATs, is not a panacea for solving the problems of struggling schools.

The bottom line is that, to be effective, operational autonomy must be accompanied by sufficient resources and by strong leadership and knowledge about how to support struggling schools. The task of finding these financial and human resources will not be easy. As we documented in Section V, the Regional Schools Commissioners who are charged with that responsibility have few good options beyond encouraging substantial numbers of effective primary schools to become academies and then to take on the task of sponsoring one or more struggling schools.

Lesson 2. School autonomy has clear limits as a school reform strategy serving the public interest

A fundamental justification for a publicly funded compulsory education system is that schooling generates public goods that extend beyond the private benefits that accrue to individual students and their families. For example, a strong and coherent education system can enable a productive and innovative economy. Other public benefits are distributional in nature and result from providing fair educational opportunity so that all children are equipped to participate in the economic and political life of the country. It is these public benefits that lead to the second lesson from the English experience: Cutting schools loose from their ties to local authorities has clear limits as a stand-alone reform strategy aimed at serving public interests. It can also inflict collateral damage that undermines such interests.

While a system of autonomous schools might produce some highly effective and innovative schools that serve their enrolled pupils extremely well, other schools are unlikely to manage this autonomy well and are likely to fail – thus reducing the effectiveness and success of the overall school system. Even in the absence of schools that are actually failing, there is little reason to expect that most individual academies will have ready access to the support and challenge they need to become highly effective schools. And the small size of primary schools may keep them from benefiting from the economies of scale that exist within a community-wide system of schools.

Historically, it was the local authorities that not only challenged and provided support for individual schools but promoted the concept of collective responsibility for all children within the area.[30] Schools saw themselves as part of a broader community. By contrast, within a fully academised system, individual schools have strong incentives to promote their own interests, not those of the public as a whole. Additional structures are needed to promote the broader good.

Despite its strong belief in the power of autonomous schools to be innovative and effective, the Conservative government clearly acknowledged that giving schools self-governing status alone would not suffice to promote broader public interests. Presumably spurred in part by the country's experience with the rapid growth in academies unleashed by the 2010 Academies Act of the prior Coalition Government, authors of the white paper promoted a system of "supported autonomy." They called for specific new structures – specifically the MATs and the regional schools commissioners – aimed at protecting public interests within a decentralized system of autonomous schools.

The MATs were intended to assure that each academy was part of a larger group of schools that, through the mechanism of school-to-school collaboration, would, create a more productive education system than would emerge if all schools were on their own. The RSCs in turn, were there to makes sure that any school Ofsted judged to be failing would be put into a high quality MAT so that it could succeed. Finally, a new national funding formula was needed to promote funding equity by assuring that each individual academy had access to the same resources as similar schools.

Based on our analysis of implementation challenges in Section V, however, our conclusion is that the government will, at best, struggle to implement the new structures and, in addition, that projected budgetary cutbacks will make it difficult to implement a new national funding formula within the next few years. Even if the government succeeds in implementing the new structures of MATs and RSCs, there is little evidence to support the optimistic view that these new structures will be more effective than the prior system of local authorities in serving the public interest through a strong and equitable school system.

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[30] For examples of how this process worked successfully in two Inner London boroughs, see Ladd and Fiske (2016).

The difficulty in such contexts is that in the process of moving to the new structures, the old structures – in this case, the local authorities – lose funding, authority and the capacity to recruit and maintain quality staffing. While in the short run the weakening of the local authorities may help promote the government's case for an all academy system, it also will make it more difficult to reverse the reform effort in the longer run should the government fail to implement fully the new structures that are essential for supporting a system of autonomous schools.

Lesson 3. An all-academy system (with MATs) reduces local input and weakens communities

The English school system has traditionally been described as a "national service locally delivered." In practice, this meant that policy and funding originated at the national level, while individual schools operated under the authority and discipline of local authorities with their democratically elected councilors. Schools played a central role in the life of social, economic and cultural life of their communities. They were responsive to – and gave voice to – local concerns. Communities in turn felt pride and a sense of ownership of their local schools.

Under a fully academised system little stands between the Secretary of State for Education and the individual academies or MATs. The result is a widespread weakening of channels for local community input into the schools, including those that operated through the locally elected council members. Historically, the local councils were in a position to balance spending on education with the needs of other local services. Moreover, the director of education services for the local council would oversee school improvement throughout the borough, and, where appropriate, support local federations or partnerships of schools aimed at promoting local collective interests. Together with a representative body of local head teachers, the director of education services would also make decisions about how to allocate resources among local schools.

None of these roles will continue under the white paper proposals for a system organized around groups of self-governing academies. MATs need not be composed only of academies within the same geographic area; and even those with geographical coherence are not structured to represent the interests of the local communities much less the broad collective interests of that community. MATs, and especially large ones, will inevitably face the temptation to pursue their own interests rather than those of local schools and communities in which some of their schools are located.

The white paper sets out three residual responsibilities for local authorities aimed at maintaining some links between academies and their communities: assuring a place for every child, protecting the interests of vulnerable children, and serving as a champion for children and families. But we have already highlighted major problems with this arrangement. Although the

white paper acknowledges the logic that justifies retaining these as local, rather than national, responsibilities, it does not assure that the local authorities have the tools they need to carry them out.

Parental input – and hence parental voice – is also directly diminished. Although parents will continue to be able to express preferences for a number of specific schools, the process of allocating children to schools will inevitably remain somewhat opaque because there is no guarantee that all the academies and MATs, who legally are their own admissions authorities, will participate in community wide assignment processes. In the past, parents exerted direct input into school policies through their role as member of school governing bodies. But in the white paper parents, in their capacity as parents only, will no longer be allowed to serve as member of academy boards.

To be sure, some of the costs associated with the loss of local community input could be reduced through changes in policies, such as a requirement that all academies participate in a single school admissions process or that parents, acting primarily as a voice for children and families, be allowed to serve as members of academy governing bodies. Nonetheless, the replacement of local responsibility for local schools with national responsibility under an academy system inevitably brings with it a significant loss of community control. Moreover, as one of our local interviewees pointed out, academisation lets local officials off the hook and could undermine their commitment to fighting the good fight for all children in the local community.

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Interviews

All of these interviews were conducted between mid-April and mid-May 2016

Rebecca Allen – Director of Education, Education Datalab

Christine Blower – General Secretary, National Union of Teachers

Anne Canning —Director of Education for Hackney Council and Head of Hackney Learning Trust

Jon Coles – Group Chief Executive, United Learning

Kevan Collins –Chief Executive, Education Endowment Foundation

Tim Coulson – Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London

Ian Craig – Former Chief Schools Adjudicator, Department for Education

Pete Dudley – Assistant Director, Achievement and Aspiration, Borough of Camden

Zina Etheridge – Deputy Chief Executive, Borough of Haringey Council

Becky Francis – Director, Institute of Education, University College London

Christine Gilbert – Former Chief Inspector of Ofsted, former Director of Education and Chief Executive Officer in Borough of Tower Hamlets

Toby Greany – Professor of Leadership and Innovation, Institute of Education, University College London

Dominic Herrington -- Regional Schools Commissioner for South-East England and South London

Lucy Heller – Chief Executive, Ark Schools

Robert Hill – Independent education consultant, former policy adviser to Prime Minister Tony Blair and other cabinet ministers

Peter Lauener—Chief Executive and Accounting Officer, Education Funding Agency

Andrew McCulley Director General for School Infrastructure and Funding, Department for Education

Stephen Machin – Professor of Economics, London School of Economics and Political Science

Steve Munby – Chief Executive, Education Development Trust

Vanessa Ogden – Headteacher, Mulberry School for Girls

Terry Parkin – Interim Service Head, Learning and Achievement, Borough of Tower Hamlets

Vivienne Porritt – Director for School Partnerships, Institute of Education, University College London

Sara Williams –Executive Director for Children and Young People's Services, Borough of Lewisham

David Woods – Visiting Professor, Institute of Education, University College London

Appendix.   Illustrative findings from Ofsted inspection of MATs

Academies Enterprise Trust (AET)

Review. January 2016, follow up to earlier reviews. This one based on inspections of 7 schools

Context. Largest trust in the country with 67 schools spread across England, with the majority in areas with high social deprivation

Illustrative summary findings.

> After operating for nearly 8 years, the Trust is failing too many pupils, and is particularly weak at the secondary level where 47 percent are failing. Only 41 percent of the AET secondary schools are good or better.

> Children from poor backgrounds do particularly poorly.

> Pupil attendance is unacceptably low.

> Not enough focus on local issues with respect to school improvement.

> 8 academies have declined since they joined the Trust.

CfBT Multi-Academy Trust

Review. May, 2015.   Based on 5 focused inspections and telephone conversations with leaders of 13 others.

Context Trust set up in January, 2011, includes 19 schools (15 academies and 4 free schools), geographically dispersed across 12 local authorities in 5 different Ofsted regions.

Illustrative summary findings.

> CfBT took on too many academies too quickly, with no strategy for geographical clusters, and no clear rationale for selection of schools.

> Standards are too low.

> About 1/3 of the schools are deemed inadequate; 4 are in special measures and 2 have serious weaknesses.

> Big achievement gap between disadvantaged and other students.

> Change in Trust leadership in 2014: Things are now a bit better and schools are getting better support.

Collaborative Academies Trust

Review. July 2015. Based on focused inspections of 4 schools and telephone conversations with senior leaders in 5.

Context: Trust set up in 2012 by Edison Learning, includes 9 academies in three local authorities; all are sponsored primary schools.

Illustrative summary findings.

> Too many schools have not improved since joining the trust.
>
> No good or outstanding academies in the Trust.
>
> Some signs of improvement.
>
> No evidence that the need of disadvantaged pupils are being met.
>
> Youngest pupils do not get a good start.

E-Act Multi-Academy Trust

Review. February, 2016, based on 7 focused inspections, and telephone calls with 16 others, follow up to a 2014 review.

Context. Trust set up in Sept 2009; The Education Funding Agency was critical of the Trust; leadership was changed in 2013. New CEO reduced head office staffing from 76 to 25; now the Trust has 23 academies evenly split between primary and secondary schools; dispersed across 10 local authorities in 7 different Ofsted regions.

Illustrative summary findings.

> Improvement since the prior review. The trust has taken a more robust and direct approach to school improvement.
>
> Nevertheless, the quality of provision for too many pupils in E-ACT academies is not good enough.
>
> Of 23 schools, more than half have ratings below good and 5 are currently inadequate.
>
> Pupils from poor backgrounds make less process than students nationally.
>
> Until recently, high rates of absenteeism.

Oasis Multi-Academy Trust

Review. March 2015, based on 10 school inspections and telephone conversations with 20 other schools

Context. Established 2004, now has 44 academies (about 2/3rds are primary schools). Experienced rapid growth, with 30 new academies in previous 3 years. (CHECK)

Illustrative summary findings.

> A legacy of weak change and insufficiently systematic or rigorous improvement work has resulted in slow or little improvement for nearly half the academies.

> Since 2014, you have taken actions to accelerate the pace of improvement in individual academies.

> The trust makes good use of its stronglest leaders. However, there is limited leadership capacity within the trust and this slows progress.

Source. Based on the Inspection Outcome letters generated by Ofsted after reviews of the individual MATS. The letters are based on full reviews of several schools in the Trust, telephone interviews with other school leaders, and review of Trust documents and interviews with Trust staff. Ofsted is allowed to review but not to rate the quality of the Trust. https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/outcome-letters-from-ofsted-inspections-of-multi-academy-trusts