

At the Labour Party conference this month, a fifteen year old girl-who arrived in the UK as an asylum seeker-was heckled by a delegate as she explained how attending an academy had helped her aspire to study law at university.

So it appears that, once a key policy of New Labour, the academy programme has been allowed to change political sides and with it an important way of improving schools, not least in the North East.

As we now approach a tipping point nationally with more than half of all schools academies, it is time to call for more of them and nail the myths that are seeing children in this region lose out.

First and foremost, academies work and the evidence is clear with GCSE results improving almost twice as fast as the average for maintained schools even though many academies start as replacements for failing schools.

Whilst the odd academy has flopped, others such as Mossbourne Academy in London stand out, sending more pupils to Oxbridge than some cities, showing what can be done in an area so deprived it was known as the capital's "murder mile".

Much of this is due to competition but some still claim that this will kill the weakest, taking their inspiration from the Socialist R.H.Tawney who said "Freedom for the pike means death for the minnow".

But in Gateshead, the effect of Emmanuel College has been to raise standards across the catchment area and academic research from the LSE supports the view that academies also improve results in neighbouring schools.

Some say that schools should be under local democratic control-by their own party of course-but such control has presided over low standards and high truancy for years in the North East.

In fact, academies remain under control but with a lighter touch and from central not local government as they become freer (not independent) schools and are still inspected by Ofsted.

But decentralisation need not be isolation as academies throughout the UK begin to work in chains either under the leadership of a shared headteacher or in partnership with the same sponsor.

Governors-some appointed by local authorities-remain as guardians and could be complemented by the recently suggested local commissioners to beef up the changing role of councils.

This may be why take-up has been more favourable than previously as academy status is now a nudge forward rather than a leap into the dark: a more pragmatic approach which many governors feel able to take.

Another reason for the greater take up is the financial bonus retained by schools as the local bureaucracy cut is bypassed and also the freedom of headteachers to choose services rather than settling for a council monopoly.

This benefits schools which can tailor their budgets more closely to the needs of their pupils rather than that of the whole local authority which, in response, may sharpen and cheapen its offer.

Prestige is also a factor with conversion now a reward for success, rather than a punishment for failure as it was under that last Labour Government with consequent foot dragging from reluctant councils.

With many schools voting with their feet, ditching the dead hand of local bureaucracy, it is time for the North East to embrace a policy which has already given us some of our best schools.

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