

The Academy Movement in England - School Reform on Steroids

Abstract

In England, training school leaders is very different than in the U.S. School/University Partnerships are practically non-existent and graduate programs in school administration are rare. A study team consisting of university personnel (from Western Kentucky University and Georgia Southern University) visited P-12 schools in England, talked with university Teacher Education faculty/staff, and visited National College – the government's single arm for providing professional development to aspiring and current school principals (called Headteachers in England). This paper will present England's current major reform effort and lay out in detail the differences between our professional development cultures. It will conclude with some observations about these differences and some potential benefits from activities where we can learn from each other. This paper was created for FASNA for sharing with its members on the FASNA Web site.

A Brief History of Politics and Education in England

Another version of this paper to be presented in the U.S. included a fairly detailed overview of the various transformations and transitions that have occurred in the UK since the 1944 Education Act. Since FASNA members and others who might read this narrative have lived through many parts of that history, it is unnecessary to present it here. We did, however, want the readers to know that we are not ignorant of the struggles your country has been through to get to this point in Autonomous Schooling. The next paragraph below is how this section is concluded in the other paper and stresses the current emphasis on autonomy for schools.

The most recent schools White Paper titled, "The Importance of Teaching," was published in November of 2010. It indicates the Coalition Government's desire to move away from a highly centralized strategy for improving schools. In contrast, the government views its role as putting in place the structures and processes to challenge and support schools to improve and stepping in where schools are failing. The Coalition Government believes that the primary responsibility for improvement rests with schools themselves, and seeks to create a system that promotes effective self-improvement (Department of Education, 2010).

Current Structures for Schools

Since the onset of mandates for increased student performance, essential to meet the needs of the global society, a proliferation of state, civilian and private organizations have challenged the profession to use scientific research as an authoritative way of working through problems that had not previously been considered from that perspective. Military efficiency, social reconstruction, health and industrial management became comparisons for education governance models (Barth, 1990; Lezotte, 1991; Reynolds, 2005). However in many countries, little attention was given to the research that suggests that education reform is more successful when all professionals, the parents, and the

clients have ownership of the reform efforts. Unlike the U.S., school reform mandates in England have moved from top-down models that focused primarily on single criteria quantitative measures, to Autonomous Schools models. The study team considered the on-site examination of the emerging models timely not only in scholarly terms but also as the financial climate prompts reassessment of effective models in medical services, industry, social services, and academe.

Interviews and observations by the study team, led the authors to conclude that English policy makers and leaders addressed the challenges facing education by supporting school leaders in their move from a submissive leadership model focused totally on test scores to informed leaders in Autonomous Schools (McLaughlin, 2006; National College, 2011). The new school models focus on effective teaching and learning practices fashioned to meet the cultural, educational, and motivational needs of the students and community. This culture of success and responsiveness is clearly evident in the schools' ethos and was expressed by students, teachers, and leaders. As already mentioned, a plethora of such school models have emerged over recent years. This section will provide further clarification of three of the most prominent models and those on which we focused our observations—Academies, Foundation Schools, and Trust Schools.

To the study team, these school models appear to be a combination of two concepts: scientific/research-based (business, military, etc.) governance strategies and shared leadership. These concepts at first glance seem to be misaligned, even opposing strategies. However the leaders of these schools have successfully met the mandates of our publics by integrating both, resulting in exceptionally strong and successful schools with one goal—improved teaching and learning for all. The table in Appendix A provides a comparison of the new Autonomous models (FASNA, 2011; SSAT, 2011).

According to the Department for Education (DfE), all schools in the [education system in England](#) are funded by the central government (DfE, 2010). However, the funding methods vary by funding stream, and most importantly, the local school's control of the funds. All three Autonomous models may receive additional support from personal or corporate sponsors. The schools must meet the National Curriculum core subject requirements and are subject to inspection by [OFSTED](#). The models are not intended to provide student-selected site options but to provide alternative routes focused on the improvement of educational outcomes for all students in the service areas. All schools are self-governing at greater levels than the non-autonomous, traditional schools with Academies having the most autonomy. Most are [registered charities](#), trusts, or they are operated by other educational charities. Most schools choosing autonomy are [secondary schools](#); however, this is changing (DfE, 2010; FASNA, 2011; SSAT, 2011).

These new models are receiving accolades from school leaders, teachers, communities, and policy makers. Praise from Rt. Honorable Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, in a speech prepared for the Spring 2011 Foundation, Aided Schools and Academies National Association (FASNA) conference, emphasized the importance of the school leader's role and the success of the Autonomous Schools in meeting improved

student learning. He used such statements as "captain of your own ship," "ability to vary the school day or week," and "the heart of everything you do is the welfare of the children" (FASNA, March 28, 2011). He affirmed the Government's support for this school reform effort to provide a first-class education for all youth.

These Autonomous models clearly allow for, and support efforts of, school leaders to become captains of their own ships, to adjust curricula to meet the needs of the local community, and to empower teachers and other professionals as leaders in determining the best ways to serve the needs of their clients. However, the study team also observed the role of FASNA in supporting this change in thinking and practice. FASNA is the only national forum for schools seeking greater autonomy in order to raise standards. It is apolitical, but has links with national academic agencies and political leadership. FASNA seeks both accountability and *academy freedom* for ALL schools, which when present would reflect the following:

- smaller government, less bureaucracy
- a transparent national funding formula
- OFSTED focused on learning and teaching
- simplified but fair admission codes
- employer flexibility
- rigorous auditing procedures (FASNA, 2011)

The study team was privileged to attend a national FASNA workshop that hosted school leaders from Autonomous Schools across the country. Sir David Bell, Permanent Secretary to the DfE opened the workshop with praise for the school leaders, their efforts that have resulted in improved student outcomes, and FASNA's role in the work. Though this level of political leadership was impressive to the U.S. study team, the most impressive part of the conference was the sharing of individual school successes, hurdle-jumping strategies, team building among the school leaders, and most important, the leaders' ownership of the national work of improving student performance.

As the study team observed these Autonomous models and interviewed teachers, leaders, and students, we were struck by the contrast between the British and U.S. school reform strategies. While the U.S. is moving toward tighter control of education—a top-down model that was abandoned in England after a generation of failure (USDE, 2010), England is moving toward maximum decentralization that includes strong accountability measures, while empowering school personnel in the roles for which they were trained—professional leaders in teaching and learning (Hargreaves, 2000; Lam, 2002; Rothstein, 1998; Sergiovanni, 2007).

The U.S. study team questions implementing a top-down model based on a single quantitative measure (standardized tests); this clearly has not worked elsewhere, and is one that has shown less than outstanding success in recent years in the U.S. Empowering school leaders and teachers by providing a model that includes strong accountability and local autonomy begs national consideration. The proposals of *A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education*, a paper presented by the best minds in U.S. education, with

Secretary Arne Duncan as a co-author, seem to support this idea (Accountability Committee, 2009). However, national policies and mandates have not supported the work (USDE, 2010). Many examples could be given. However, one of the most obvious is the U.S. models that allow schools to practice selectivity of youngsters. Selectivity will result in academic improvement for schools but at the cost of denying access to all. The British Autonomous Schools models disallow such selectivity and mandate success for all students in a school's service area as a condition for approval. Therefore, the U.S. study team questions the alignment of recent U.S. policies and mandates and strongly suggest a 're-think' of supported reform models.

Headteacher Preparation in England and The National College

To understand the study team's reaction to what was encountered in England concerning the preparation of school leaders (i.e., Headteachers), one needs to understand our history and experience here in the United States. It is only through our own experiences that we can realistically absorb what appear to us as the peculiarities of another culture. Thus, a brief overview of administrator preparation in the U.S. is in order.

School teachers who wish to pursue principalship (Headteacher, in England) certification must enroll in a state-approved program at a regionally-accredited college or university. Admission standards vary, according to the requirements of the individual institution, but these criteria involve a combination of at least some of the following:

1. A completed application form that includes contact and certification information
2. A letter of interest indicating why they are interested in pursuing a principalship degree or administrative certification
3. Graduate Record Examination (GRE) results on all three areas: Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, and Analytical Writing. Most programs require a minimum score on these three components.
4. A writing sample (onsite)
5. Evidence of demonstrated leadership within educational settings
6. Recommendations from educators familiar with the candidate's capabilities

The trend in recent years has been to partner with local school districts to help identify those individuals who demonstrate innate skills and abilities that contribute to effective leadership within educational settings. Some programs are now expecting local school districts to take an even more active role throughout the program from recommendations, to screening/admission, to co-instruction of courses, to participating in the final assessment of candidates for completion of the program/graduation. Partnerships between school districts and graduate programs at postsecondary institutions (overseen by the state as the certifying agent) have been part of the culture for decades here in the U.S.

Some states are even mandating specific structures for these preparation programs. For example, in Kentucky, all principal preparation programs have recently been converted to add-on certification programs (students must come to us with a master's degree) and have rather rigidly prescribed areas of content through a state-developed document (*Continuum for Principal Preparation and Development* found at [http://www.education.ky.gov/kde/administrative+resources/school+improvement/leadership+and+evaluation/kentucky+cohesive+leadership+system+\(kycls\)/principal+preparation+redesign+initiatives.htm](http://www.education.ky.gov/kde/administrative+resources/school+improvement/leadership+and+evaluation/kentucky+cohesive+leadership+system+(kycls)/principal+preparation+redesign+initiatives.htm)). The standard master's degree is a Master of Arts in Education in Teacher Leadership. The state has placed leadership in the spotlight and apparently feels that all educators need at least some exposure to leadership concepts and practices before pursuing additional certification in a particular area (e.g., school principalship).

The sources for the following information include FASNA representatives, Academy leaders and teachers interviewed at visited schools and those who attended the FASNA conference, the National College representatives, and our own observations while we were in England. The "leader preparation picture" in England differs considerably from that noted above and provided in the U.S.

The first major difference lies in the relationships that school practitioners have (or really don't have) with universities. In more than one setting, we were told the following:

1. Very few universities have educational leadership programs;
2. Those that do focus mainly on research and theory – relatively little practical preparation, and rigor is lacking;
3. Little or no communication transpires between universities and Headteachers on leadership issues; and
4. Essentially, no meaningful relationship exists between the two – neither looks to the other as a source of input or information concerning what they do.

Several, if not many, universities have teacher preparation programs that – best we could tell with our discussions with faculty/administrators at University of Derby – resemble to a large degree our teacher preparation programs here in the states. Although we did not get into the curriculum of the program, the general structure of the programs – coursework, observations, teaching blocks, and student teaching – look very similar. However, we were struck that universities – at least the one we visited – who took such pride in their teacher preparation programs had no desire to branch out into similar preparation of future leaders. It was like, "Why should we?" – as if we were proposing a concept that they really never had considered.

This, to us, was the major difference in the two countries and their views on the preparation of school leaders. The U.S. practices what it preaches when it says that the school leader is the "key" individual within the school for making sure that schools do

what they are supposed to do at high levels. This may be carried to the extreme in some states, but universities and schools will collaborate and universities will prepare prospective school leaders in fairly prescribed ways, or they will not be able to certify candidates for school level positions. This suggests a *major* difference in what we found in England.

Not knowing for sure whether the chicken or the egg came first, we assume that the National College was an outgrowth of this lack of a relationship between schools and universities, at least where leadership preparation programs are concerned. It is also our understanding that the pool for potential Headteachers was shallow as well, and the establishment and prominence of the College might help this as well. The National College has instituted a measure of accountability where their certifications are concerned. This program is called the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) and involves this information found at the following Web site:
<http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/professional-development/npqh>.

- Headteachers must hold the NPQH if they are to be appointed in the "maintained" sector
 - This means if they are not an academy school – there are now about 1500 academies up from a figure of about 250 in May 2010
- It is for those who aspire to a headship as a next career move; it focuses on the role and its requirements
- It involves the following:
 - Up to 7 hours of coaching
 - A choice from 15 online short courses
 - 3-4 weeks of online training
 - School-based learning opportunities
 - Placement in a development school
- The training is in line with the National Standards for Headteachers – (<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DFES-0083-2004>).

It has been noted by those with whom we spoke that these Standards were too often perceived to be heavily politicized and contained too many value-judgments rather than actual standards. Apparently, those contributing to the creation of these Standards included members of LEAs, the Department for Education, and academics who were felt to be sympathetic to the Labour Government. No practicing or retired Headteachers were believed to be significantly engaged in this task, so their worth as true Headteacher Standards is questioned by many.

The National College has been funded very well by the government but their funding was cut in the last budgeting session. The belief was that it survived being totally cut due only to political connections. It is not our place to assume why these decisions were being made (or at least considered), but based on the comments of those we encountered, The National College is not highly regarded by all practitioners. Some of the negative comments follow:

- The program lacks rigor
- Its content is not applicable to real-life leadership within schools
- It does not help prepare individuals for the realities of Headteachership

Finally, for Autonomous Schools – the Academies – NPHQ is not required. It is our assumption that the government, in its effort to free these schools from outside interference and allow them to do their jobs, has removed even this step toward official interference. Evidently, the accountability measures imposed upon the schools for student success are testimony enough of these individuals and results are the stamp of certification, not some governmental professional development process.

Lessons Learned and Questions to Ponder

Our professional visit to English Academy Schools left our team with a sense of excitement about the future of schooling in the England and much to ponder about the implications of the British experience for schools in the United States. As educators involved in the training and development of aspiring school leaders here in the States, we also left with an appreciation for the enormous leadership challenge Academy Schools are facing and questions about whether and how English school leaders will prepare themselves to meet the ever-growing demands that accompany school autonomy.

Here in the States we have watched as curriculum, assessment, and even instruction have become increasingly centralized. Beginning with the Reagan administration's scathing *A Nation at Risk* report in 1983 and culminating with 2002's No Child Left Behind Act, American governments at both the state and national level expressed growing concern about the percentage of students failing to meet basic proficiency in core learning areas like reading and math and instituted various high-stakes accountability models designed to create uniform measures of student learning and to impose rewards or sanctions on schools for their progress toward proficiency (or lack thereof). The implicit assumption behind these top-down reform and accountability efforts is that, left to their own autonomous devices, local schools and districts will fail to articulate a "guaranteed, viable curriculum" for all students (Marzano, 2003) and will fail to teach all students to proficiency.

This tendency toward centralization and standardization has also been the trend in the United Kingdom, which has shared the United States' increasingly long history of stagnant student achievement scores. Both countries post less than stellar rankings on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), for example. In the 2009 PISA results, the United States ranked fifteenth among OECD countries, while the UK ranked twentieth (Shepherd, 2010). So, like the U.S., schools in the UK have grown accustomed to national targets for school improvement and publicized rankings of school outcomes, along with various local and national schemes for introducing new instructional strategies, assessment techniques and various technical "fixes" to close achievement gaps. Since 1997 and the top-down culture that prevailed until very recently, the UK has gone *down* in the rankings.

But as we learned on our study tour, parallel with the push for centralization England has also enjoyed a long-standing movement for greater school autonomy, beginning with foundation and Trust Schools and the introduction of Academy Schools under the Blair administration. This movement has perhaps reached a new summit with the expansion of Academy Schools under the current Conservative-Liberal coalition government. New Academy Schools, which represent the emerging model for all British schools, operate with public funds but near total autonomy in terms of curriculum development, instructional delivery, budgets, personnel, admissions procedures, and management; they also own the land and buildings both as assets but also with their liabilities. No equivalent for this level of school autonomy exists in the United States. Even our charter schools, which operate under a vast array of structures and regulations as dictated by various local and state guidelines, do not typically enjoy the level of freedom afforded the British Academy Schools.

This autonomy, however, has not meant a lessening of standards or expectations for schools in the England, nor is there an assumption that Autonomous Schools will naturally be more successful. Goals for school performance and universal assessment systems remain and have even been raised under this government. The acceptable floor level before there is intervention has been raised and will be raised progressively within this parliamentary term, but schools are now free to innovate as they see fit to meet these targets. Coupled with these measures of school performance is the ultimate form of accountability: schools that fail to meet their accountability goals will be subject to take-over by more successful schools, potentially by conglomerations of school "families" that function like divisions or franchises within a corporation, or even be shut down completely and replaced with new school entities. The possibility of "free" schools, established by local bodies of parents, civic organizations, trusts, or businesses to compete with failing schools, may provide yet another set of alternatives for English parents who already enjoy greater school choice than parents in the U.S., but such schools would operate under the same regulations as Academies.

In essence, the national government will establish various measures and publicly report how schools are performing, schools will be free to offer educational services as they see fit, and parents will have wide latitude in choosing from the various options (schools have the right to limit their enrollments and favor students living in close proximity, but will not be able to otherwise discriminate among students for admission purposes; however, they will be able to increase the number of students they admit). Schools that fail to satisfy parents and deliver high levels of student achievement will be replaced or go out of "business" altogether.

From an American perspective, this is a level of school "choice" far beyond anything experienced in the U.S., even under our various state and local voucher schemes. It represents a fundamental shift away from the top-down, technocratic approaches of "fixing" schools long favored both here and in the UK. It also means a level of performance accountability heretofore unknown in either country. Teachers and school principals in failing schools, who have in the past sometimes been shielded from real accountability by their attachment to a local educational authority responsible for

multiple schools, may face the ultimate professional consequence: the loss of their jobs as schools are taken over, closed, or replaced.

Besides the high stakes involved in school autonomy, leaders of Autonomous Schools also face an array of new demands and decisions once delegated to the LEA. The vast majority (99%) of English Headteachers were themselves teachers prior to assuming a leadership role and have no experience with many of the managerial, legal, financial, and human resource challenges academy status will ultimately require. This is especially true for leaders in poor performing schools that will have academy status foisted upon them, but is also true in high-performing schools wherein teachers and heads enthusiastically embrace autonomy. However, it should be noted that many City Academies and Foundation Schools and Trust Schools have practiced these freedoms for 10 or more years.

And perhaps this is where, from our perspectives as American professors and students of educational leadership, we are most interested in the implications and challenges of school autonomy exemplified in the English academy model. As noted previously, traditionally English Headteachers were not required to obtain any credential or training to serve as school administrators. While in recent years new heads were required to complete the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), academy heads face no such requirement. The future of the National College of School Leadership, which maintains a monopoly over the delivery of NPHQ, is increasingly uncertain, both because of the government's current budgetary woes and because NPHQ itself may no longer be relevant as more and more schools move to academy status.

So English academy heads face an unprecedented level of responsibility and authority with little to no formal training in how to think about, manage, and solve the array of problems implicit in Autonomous Schools. This may be viewed both as a challenge and as a rich opportunity. Freed of government mandates for training and professional development, academy Headteachers and aspiring Headteachers may voluntarily seek out and design professional learning opportunities targeted to their specific, immediate needs. With no LEA to offer (or mandate) staff development programs, current Academies are already experimenting with cross-academy partnerships to design and deliver teacher training and development based on mutually-identified needs and talents. But is this "just in time" approach sufficient for preparing school leaders with the ocean of managerial and leadership problems they will face on the job? FASNA provides a link to each other and to other organized professional development opportunities. Is there anything to be said for exposing aspiring leaders to these issues and how they might respond *before* they actually assume headship?

Certainly in the U.S. we have our own structures for administrator preparation, and while we are personally invested in such programs, we would not argue that the American approach is perfect or necessarily appropriate for the United Kingdom. Our own failing schools and lackluster international performance reveals that simply mandating completion of a degree or certificate for school administration does not directly correlate

to higher levels of student achievement. Some students complete our programs but do not make effective school leaders.

Nor do we suggest otherwise. But we do believe that administrator preparation has its place, especially in helping aspiring school leaders learn to think critically about school-wide instructional and managerial problems, to consider their own strengths, limitations, and growth areas as leaders, and to see the process of schooling with an "administrative eye," the multifaceted perspective demanded of an effective principal or head (Keaster & Schlinker, 2009).

The Future

The demands faced by academy Headteachers in the England will far exceed those of traditional school principals in the U.S. and we believe well-designed, practical but research-informed programs of professional training and development will be essential in the years ahead. Given the open-ended nature of Autonomous Schools, such training programs could take a variety of forms, from partnerships with local universities (an apparent growth opportunity in the UK), to consortia of Academies providing just-in-time professional development, to various grow-your-own, in-house training cadres for aspiring administrators. The free and flexible nature of Autonomous Schools will dictate that no single delivery model for professional training will prevail, but will rather support a plethora of models and approaches to meet varying individual and school needs.

We are also eager to see what role American schools and universities might play in the professional learning experiences of British schools in the future. With our long-standing traditions of administrator preparation, American universities might partner with Academy Schools in the design and delivery of professional growth models and programs, though practicing educators in England would have to play key roles in crafting and delivering content most relevant to the Academies' needs, contexts, and the required skill-sets to be successful. Perhaps even more exciting is the possibility of technology-enhanced, international exchange and professional development programs wherein American school leaders could engage in professional learning (virtually and literally) alongside their UK counterparts. U.S. educators would be greatly enriched in learning directly from the experiences of academy Headteachers. Even as education policy in the U.S. trends ever more toward centralization, a strong and growing movement toward greater parental choice and market-driven reform runs in parallel, suggesting a future that might look more like England's. As American school principals prepare to lead in this ever-shifting environment, they might find much in common with England's academy Heads. Ultimately, such international collaborations might also involve practicing school leaders from high-performing countries such as Canada, triangulating to share best practices from three different countries.

Regardless of the model adopted, English Academy Schools will face enormous professional learning needs in the years to come. As English schools stretch the limits of autonomy and accountability, we eagerly await to see how new models of leadership training and development emerge.

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