

Academization

A Position Paper

Schools have been invited to become academies since the early 2000s, a Labour initiative, further bolstered in 2010 by the Conservative/Lib Dem Coalition. There are many types of academies, large and small, successful and otherwise, and we have all perhaps seen the very worst type of academy chain that just seems to grow for the sake of growing, hoovering up other schools and delivering a standard model of education that must be followed by all. This is not a model of education I would ever pursue.

Academization takes a school out of Local Authority control and gives it new levels of freedom. Initially, the suggestion was that academization would mean greater financial income for the school; if this money did indeed exist, it has certainly dried up now.

All leaders in this sector have had to keep their eyes on the rapidly changing landscape to check that we have the right model in place and the right status for the right time. This is basic business practice.

On two occasions we have seriously considered academization, in 2017 and in 2019. On the first occasion, Dr Baxter and I went to KCC Sessions House for a meeting with County officers where we were reassured and convinced that staying within Local Authority control was the best option for the school. We have always enjoyed a good relationship with KCC and felt comfortable within that family. When Darren Watson and I re-visited this in 2019, as increasing numbers of school changed their status, we could still not see the clear argument to proceed.

Times change, however. As of today, over 80% of secondary schools in England and Wales are academies and that figure rises to around 87% for Grammar Schools. We were very surprised last year when the current government, in the guise of the then Education Secretary, Nadhim Zahawi, announced that all schools would need to be in Multi Academy Trusts by 2030.

I spoke with Mr Zahawi at the conference for Grammar School Heads in London at the time and gauged his strength of feeling for the direction of travel. Obviously, he was gone in a few weeks and the revolving door at Westminster gave us a dizzying succession of Education Secretaries and the White Paper in which his plan was embedded never turned into law.

However, Dr Mark Fenton, Chair of the GSHA, made his advice very clear to me and my fellow headteachers that now was the time to start having conversations with other schools about such opportunities as may be available and not risk being forced into an uncomfortable academization at a later date. Dr Fenton knows The Langton very well and I trust his advice as one of the leading headteachers of his generation.

It is very clear that whilst the White Paper never turned into guidance or policy, the direction of travel towards academization has not gone away. It is worth being aware, also, that there is no opposition to the academization programme from the Labour Party who introduced it in the first place. That has been made clear to us from local Labour politicians. A change of government at the next election is, therefore, unlikely to delay progress in this area.

I could foresee, from the moment that schools were first encouraged to move away from Local Authority control, that this was a genie that was never going to go back in the bottle. There is a real concern that a future Secretary of State, and we do see so many of them these days, might, quite sensibly, instruct the small percentage of maintained schools remaining to change to academy status to ensure uniformity across the education system. Politicians have notorious form for springing snap, surprise decisions upon us. In the last month, the current government has offered us the British Baccalaureate and a ban on mobile phones in schools, neither of which were seen coming.

I cannot risk leaving the future of The Langton to a politician's whim. Not when I can take means to protect us from this. For the first time in our thinking, KCC is not trying to talk us out of leaving Local Authority control. Local Authorities across the country are struggling financially and, as more and more schools leave LA control, it becomes less of an option for Local Authorities to provide the same robust support for the few schools that remain in their care. That we have been supported on our journey, so far, by KCC, to my mind, speaks volumes.

Given that we have worked so successfully, for so long, with Canterbury Academy on an informal basis, it is both right and wise at this point to consider whether we should make our partnership more formal. There is not another Multi Academy Trust operating in the county that I could envisage working with, now or in the future.

Progress Towards

Last year, in the light of the above, we had to establish both due diligence and feasibility to see if it was even possible to enter into a formal partnership with The Canterbury Academy Trust. Having established that, it was then time to see whether the Langton Governing Body would actually look favourably on the idea of academization as the future direction of travel. There would have been no point pursuing the idea further if we could not get Full Board approval. The purpose of the Full Governing Body single agenda meeting on June 22nd 2023, was to see, having considered the arguments put before them, whether the Governing Body would actually consider academization. In the event, the governors voted unanimously in favour of moving towards formal academization. In voting in favour of this, they signalled a wish to begin the journey of the formal process of becoming an academy.

The first step on that journey is consultation with our stakeholders, which is where we are today. The earliest date at which the governors might decide to formally apply for academy status is at the Full Governing Body meeting on November 23rd when they will have had time to contemplate the stakeholders' contributions. At that meeting they will decide yes or no to academization or decide that they need more time to come to a decision. Any application to the DfE to change the school's status will not be made until after that November meeting, and after consultation and a decision has been made.

The Langton's stakeholder group is large. Obviously, as parents you are a very key part of this. It can be argued that the primary stakeholders are the staff of the school who draw their livelihood from The Langton and I have to say that, following internal discussions, teachers and support staff are very much in favour of the move towards academization. That, again, is a big tick and endorsement for me. We must also consult with our alumni, the 1248 Langton

Society, many of whom retain very close ties with their *alma mater*, and also with colleagues in local primary and secondary schools who might, reasonably, claim ramifications or opportunities for their school or community.

I mentioned earlier that over 80% of secondary schools in England and Wales are now academies, but in the primary sector that figure falls to around 40% and I am conscious that primary headteachers are nervous about the very real threat of takeover if all schools were to be pushed into a Multi Academy Model. If we do establish The Canterbury Trust, a rebranded Trust for the city and its environs, we could potentially offer safe harbour to local primary schools and give them freedom from takeover but, more importantly, autonomy to carry on serving their communities in the excellent ways that they have been doing for generations of local children. Some local Primary heads are excited by this possible opportunity. I would be very keen to help provide a Canterbury solution to a Canterbury problem.

Current Benefits

Over the last 11 years The Langton and Canterbury Academy have successfully shared resources for the benefit of both institutions and to the detriment of neither.

To begin the combined elite sporting academies that exist across the two schools, we appointed Nicky Little to lead on the rugby academy. His salary is shared across both schools. Neither school could have afforded him on their own. This is an example of the buying power that two institutions together can provide. School rugby at The Langton has never been so strong and, whilst some might argue that this is just sport, we do believe in the transformative power of sport to take young boys and to turn them into good men. And to give the same opportunity to our Sixth Form girls.

Tim Fox, formerly an Assistant Headteacher at The Langton, is now a Senior Vice-Principal at Canterbury Academy overseeing the performance of the Langton academic stream. Though a Langton employee, he works entirely from The Academy who pay his salary. The academic interactions between the two schools are such that, because of The Langton Stream at The Academy, Canterbury Academy students have joined The Langton and gone on to take places at Cambridge. Staff at The Langton have been delivering A Level courses to Canterbury Academy students in Biology and Politics for over 8 years.

Two years ago, the Examinations Officer at The Langton resigned and left for a job in Higher Education. The position, with on-costs, cost The Langton around 35K per year. After conversations with Canterbury Academy leaders, it was agreed that we could outsource the practice of exams to the exams team at the Academy at a much reduced cost of around 17K. These small financial gains mean a lot more to stretched school budgets than might appear to private sector employees.

This year, following our Head of Careers' decision to leave the profession, we have established a Careers Hub which meets on a Thursday to operate on both a surgery drop-in and formal appointment basis for all students needing careers advice using Canterbury Academy staff. In all my time at the school, I have been conscious that, whilst we offer excellent support to students applying to university, our provision for students who want to

engage with other forms of training or wish to go straight into the world of work has never been as robust as I would have wished. Of course, this is an area of strength at The Academy and, as we are seeing a marked increase in student interest here in apprenticeships rather than progressing inevitably to university, this is a real bonus for the school.

The Design Department at The Langton is flourishing under Dan Pledger's leadership and numbers gravitating towards the subject are high. We need more staffing to cope with the increased number of Design classes in the school and we have struggled to fill that gap. Recruitment is a massive issue for schools in the South East as it is obviously the part of the country where a teacher's salary has the least buying power and Design is a shortage area for quality teaching. Because luck dictated that Canterbury Academy had a surplus of Design teachers, we were able to access high quality Design teaching from a partner which helped us enormously through the year.

Two years ago, The Langton, along with Canterbury Academy, Canterbury Primary and St. Nicholas' special school formed the Concordia Learning Alliance to deliver CPD to teachers in Kent. Working with Thames Gateway, staff from all the schools deliver bespoke training courses for teachers locally as well as delivering the standard countrywide National Professional Qualifications for teachers. There is a gap in the market currently that the schools have wisely identified which provides the opportunity to raise much needed money for our own institutions. This has been a very powerful innovation

These are just some of the many economies of scale that can work for both institutions.

Future Opportunities

Academisation does offer freedoms both financially and educationally. The school would have more freedom to deliver a curriculum of its own choosing. We have totally re-written our Key Stage 3 curriculum for full implementation this academic year. The content and structure are unique to our school and are the product of a year's focus by all teaching staff. The History of Ideas programme that runs at the core of The Langton Curriculum is equally unique to this school. We have a history of curriculum innovation that will play out nicely under this new freedom.

Running school finance in the maintained sector is a real challenge in that we are not allowed to set a deficit budget, but, under Schools' Financial Services scrutiny, we are subject to Balance Control Mechanism meaning that we are not allowed to build up financial reserves above a relatively modest figure and that, if we do, we simply have to hand the money back. An unexpected, un-funded pay rise for teaching or support staff, which has happened twice in the last 6 years, can decimate a planned school budget. As an academy we would be free of Balance Control Mechanism and would have the opportunity to build a financial reserve that will absorb similar financial shock. Only this weekend it was reported that a mistake in government calculations means we stand to receive less funding than was previously promised in the years 2024/25 – probably in the region of 80K. If we put the context that a maintained school with a very healthy financial state is probably only carrying forward a balance of about £200K, you get the sense of how precarious school budgets are.

Both schools have Specialist Resourced Provisions attached to them supporting students with an EHCP. Staff across the SRPs have a multitude of rare and niche skills that could be deployed more widely and the opportunity for sharing best practice is huge. We do know that there is a mental health crisis across the nation and senior staff have already had discussions about whether, if academization takes place, there would be the opportunity to employ an educational psychiatrist across the two organisations. It is increasingly difficult to get access to CAMHS and the ability to potentially recruit an ex-CAMHS practitioner would be very attractive.

What Would Academisation Look Like?

In practice, there should be no noticeable difference to the day to day running of the school. Both schools will retain autonomy over curriculum, budget, uniform, calendar and any other strategy or policy they wish to pursue. Staff will continue to teach and work in the schools where they were appointed. If staff wish to experience other aspects of education as they are practiced in other areas of the trust, they will be very welcome to do so. Nobody will be asked to work somewhere against their wishes.

I will have an over-arching responsibility, with Jon Watson at Canterbury Academy, to lead the Trust which may take a day a week of my time. This will not compromise my work at The Langton and may give opportunities for senior staff to experience different responsibility at the school. Otherwise, it will be the same faces teaching our young people, in the same way.

Conclusion

We do find ourselves in a situation where, having considered all the opportunities available, including sitting tight, staying as we are and hoping nothing will happen, the Governing Body has opted unanimously to begin the formal consultation and the formal progress towards becoming an academy. We have been discussing this policy for years. The senior leadership are unanimous in their view that there is an inevitability about the academization agenda that is best grasped now to make sure that we are the ones choosing our destiny and that we are very comfortable with our colleagues at Canterbury Academy and are confident in our ability to work together for the betterment of both organisations and to the detriment of neither.

The DfE are clear that it is no longer an option to become a stand-alone academy or form a new multi academy trust. These options, if we had ever wanted them, are now gone to us and the DfE message is that Grammar Schools entering into MATs are an essential part of the government's "levelling up" agenda and they are not looking at Grammar Schools academizing with other Grammar Schools. That said, it would not be impossible for us to admit another local Grammar School into the Trust at a later date.

The teaching and support staff at The Langton are overwhelmingly in favour of joining Canterbury Academy in a newly branded Trust for the same pragmatic reason that they see it as inevitable, but, also, as an opportunity to do something new and exciting for the children of Canterbury and Coastal region. They have my assurances that their jobs are secure and that

this will not result in any redundancies or restructures or redirection of staff to other parts of the Trust.

This is my 36th year at the school. It has been an absolute privilege to spend my career here and I hope to have several more years to come. Latterly, as the leader, I have become even more cautious about big decisions which, in this case, have an existential impact on the school and I would never do anything if I thought the risk to the school was great. The previous headteacher, Matthew Baxter, handed over the school to me in a much better state than he inherited it, and I know my job is to do the very same for my successor when the time comes. Jon Watson at the Academy is an Old Langton and is as passionate about The Langton as I am. For much of my career I have been suspicious of the academy programme, but I am now of the view that the time is right. I do not believe that the Local Authority will have the long capacity to keep supporting us in the excellent way they have in the past, because of resources, not because of any failing on their part, and I believe it is finally time to seize an opportunity available to us, to protect the unique nature of this school which this move will provide.

As things stand, we would be the lead school in the partnership with, at the very least, an equal voice in determining the Trust's future direction. The Langton will continue to operate autonomously, uniquely and to the dance of its own drum safe from any future sudden political whim. For these reasons, I recommend the plan to academize to you.

Ken Moffat