

# Limiting academies is backwards step for Britain's pupils

**O**NE OF the greatest success stories of the education system in England for the past quarter of a century has been our academy schools. They have given pupils improved education standards, better exam results, more choice and greater freedom.

It will therefore come as little surprise, after this Labour Government's disastrous first six months, that Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson intends to meddle with academies, even to threaten their very existence.

The ill-named Children's Wellbeing And Schools Bill has been described by critics as "education vandalism". Former Conservative education secretary Michael Gove went further, branding the move a "tragedy".

Academies were created by New Labour and are now widespread up and down the country: 80% of secondary schools and 40% of primary schools have academy status.

Although academies are state schools that receive government funding, the trusts that run them have more control over how they are managed. They do not have to follow the National Curriculum and set their own term times and school hours.

Some are supported by sponsors, including individuals, businesses, universities, faith groups and other schools who work to improve performance.

**I**FOUNDED ADT City Technology College in Putney, south west London, in 1991, one of few state-funded independent schools at the time. The school's conversion in 2007 to the Ashcroft Technology Academy (ATA) enabled it to continue building its strong reputation for success.

Today, the academy provides free education for more than 1,500 inner-city children of all abilities and backgrounds. As chairman of trustees, I take huge pride in its achievements,



Picture posed by models. GETTY

**PROMISE:** But there are worries students will lose out under reforms to education



## Lord Ashcroft

Guest columnist

and feel protective towards it. At present, ATA is the 15th top performing school in the country – no mean feat – out of more than 4,000 secondary schools.

It recently received the award for best state school for the International Baccalaureate, while the A-Level performance ranks the academy as one of the top performing state sixth forms in the country. ATA is also the fifth best performing in terms of attendance, at 98.1%.

These and ATA's many other achievements are only possible because of its academy status, enabling it to have greater autonomy, a tailored curriculum, better financial control and focused governance.

Our results are not achieved by cherry-picking the brightest students. More than a quarter require additional educational support and/or are classified as disadvantaged.

However, we get our results by making them motivated and

aspirational and insisting on strict discipline. We also pay the best teachers more than the average wage.

Trustees are convinced the academy's outstanding results are only possible because decisions on the curriculum, teaching methods and other key policies are taken at local level and tailored to the specific needs of students. But under the new Bill, local authorities would have greater influence and the dynamic decision-making of ATA and others would be lost.

The Government wants all schools to follow the National Curriculum and there are concerns academies will be forced to follow reformed national pay scales and conditions.

For the past 25 years, academies have enjoyed all-party support – and opposition to the new Bill is not along party lines.

Many Labour MPs champion the academy system and do not back the "dumbing down" of

academic achievement. Labour MP Dame Siobhain McDonagh spoke passionately in opposition to the new Bill, insisting academies had helped drive up standards in deprived areas.

**S**HE SAID others in government agreed with her concern, adding: "Often in the education world, children don't come first. Beliefs and views about structures and ownership come first." Unlike the principled Dame Siobhain, there are undoubtedly others in the Labour Party who would rather see universal mediocrity than allow talented students to excel.

Destroying the academies or drastically reducing their autonomy would be a terrible waste of something that has become a source of pride and joy in our education system.

I appeal to one and all to block these reforms and to allow academies to flourish for another quarter of a century and beyond.

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**'Many do not back the dumbing down of academic achievement'**