

BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

RADIO 4

TRANSCRIPT OF "FILE ON 4" - ACADEMIES

CURRENT AFFAIRS GROUP

TRANSMISSION: Tuesday 23rd November 2004 2000 - 2040

REPEAT: Sunday 28th November 2004 1700 - 1740

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PRODUCER: Ian Muir-Cochrane

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PROGRAMME NUMBER: 04VY3047LHO

THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

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ACTUALITY OF HEAD AT GATES

HEAD: Good morning. Am I going to have a moan about ties, boys? Pull that collar down.

NORTHAM: 8.30 in the morning and the Principal of Bristol City Academy is greeting pupils at the school gates.

HEAD: You look really tired this morning. What time were you up?

BOY: Half six.

HEAD: Half six. That wasn't so bad. Hello, how are you?

NORTHAM: This is one of Britain's poorest urban areas and the government has decided to give it one of the most dazzling new schools. The Prime Minister calls this social justice in action. Billions are to be spent on a succession of two hundred independent, state-funded academies to replace the most recalcitrant failing

NORTHAM cont: Club. The Head of Sport, Becky Pearce ensures that children get the best from these facilities.

PEARCE: The students are actually videoing each other, and what they do is, they watch someone playing a shot for a few minutes and then they play the video back and the students can actually see how they're playing, rather than us just telling them, they can see it for themselves, so it makes the invisible visible really. We've got three 72" plasma screens ...

NORTHAM: Have you ever taught in a school that has a gymnasium the size of an aircraft hangar?

PEARCE: No. I mean, this has been a real privilege, to be honest. The difference we've noticed with the students and their expectations about themselves in terms of just having a facility like this, it makes them feel proud to be part of a city academy and it, it just ups everyone's expectations, I think, and when you look at the area around the school there's a lot of deprivation, and for these students this means so much to them. So it's been fantastic.

NORTHAM: This is exactly what the government intends. Of the £28 million that has gone into building this independent school, the great bulk - more than £25 million - is from public funds. The justification from the Schools Minister, David Miliband, is that it's directed at the most disadvantaged children.

MILIBAND: We think that the levels of achievement and aspiration in some of our most disadvantaged communities do not do justice to the young people in those communities, and we need a serious and systematic attempt to raise both aspiration and achievement. The academies programme is targeted at our communities at greatest disadvantage, and there they need more than a new building or a new head or a new curriculum or a different set of governors. What they need is all of those things at the same time, and that's why the academies are a systematic attempt to tackle educational underperformance.

NORTHAM: The principal of Bristol City Academy, Ray Priest, was the head of the previous failing school, which was housed in Victorian buildings on the same site. Like them, he's been put through an extensive programme of reconstruction, ready for re-launch.

PRIEST: We're trying to give people a sense of belief and a desire to learn, and you put those two things together, you've got a recipe for success.

NORTHAM: You've had a year now. What's changed?

PRIEST: I think the significant things that have changed is that first of all people are innovating in terms of teaching and learning. That's made a huge difference. There is a real sense of belief. We've seen performance really rise significantly in terms of GCSEs up 7%, in terms of SATS – 10% improvement, in terms of attendance – up into the 90% plus now. All of those are real key indicators. But forgetting that, I think as well there is a real change in young people's confidence and pride in their school.

NORTHAM: The success of academies in the league tables is important for the Prime Minister's legendary pre-occupation with educational achievement. When results from a number of academies in this year's GCSEs showed substantial improvement, the government was quick to highlight them. But the whole picture may be rather less encouraging. The full list of this year's results is still unavailable from the Department for Education, but research for File On 4 by the University of Durham has uncovered figures for eight of the twelve academies that took this year's exams, recording their students' success in getting five good passes. They show three with significant improvement:

READER IN STUDIO: Willesden – up from 13 to 32%.

READER 2 IN STUDIO: Bexley - up from 7 to 35%.

READER IN STUDIO: Walsall – up from 22 to 49%.

NORTHAM: Five others, though, show only slight improvement or none at all:

READER IN STUDIO: Greig City – 2001, 30%. 2004, 30%.

READER 2 IN STUDIO: Djanogly – 2001, 52%. 2004, 52%.

NORTHAM: When the government announced this summer that there are to be two hundred academies over the decade, there was some surprise at Westminster. The Department for Education's own report says there's an evaluation of the policy, with its first report on progress due late this year. If the government favours evidence-based policy-making, it was asked, why not wait for the evidence before announcing such a huge expansion of the programme? There was no clear explanation. The evaluation is being carried out for the government by Price Waterhouse Coopers, who wouldn't tell File On 4 what they've found, but did confirm early this month that their first report is complete and has been sent to the government. So it will find its way to the Schools Minister David Miliband.

MILIBAND: We've commissioned a five year evaluation of the academies programme, and we're in year one of that work.

NORTHAM: Your own departmental report for this year says, 'We've commissioned an evaluation. The first annual report on the progress of the policy is due later in 2004.' Well, that's now.

MILIBAND: Well, I haven't received the report that's been referred to.

NORTHAM: Price Waterhouse tell me they've finished it and sent it to the Department.

MILIBAND: Right, well, very good news and we shall go and find out where it is.

NORTHAM: You can't tell me what's in it then?

MILIBAND: Well I don't, I haven't seen it so I certainly can't tell you what's in it.

NORTHAM: Is it going to be made public?

MILIBAND: My understanding of the report that you've been referring to is that the authors of the study, the researchers into the study believe that five years is the right basis on which to do a serious evaluation of the programme.

NORTHAM: Well the government has already decided that there are going to be two hundred academies, a huge expansion of the programme.

MILIBAND: Well there are 3,500 secondary schools in England. There are 450 schools in disadvantaged areas where exam results are really quite poor, so we're proposing that, for less than half of the schools in areas of great disadvantage, where there is educational under-achievement, the academies are the right option. That seems to me to be a judicious way of putting together what many educationalists believe to be common sense.

NORTHAM: The political sensitivity of these schools and their educational standards came to the fore this summer, in a fierce debate about the first of the academies to open – set on a grim concrete estate in southeast London.

GARRARD: Thamesmead was the worst school I had ever seen. It was abysmal.

NORTHAM: Each academy needs a patron – usually a business sponsor. Once he saw Thamesmead the self-made property millionaire Sir David Garrard, made it his choice.

GARRARD: It was in a state of almost total destruction. Vandalism had been rife. Violence was apparent wherever one walked. The building was in a state of complete disrepair and disarray. Most of the teachers were supply teachers. The children were fighting, shouting, and I decided that this was the place where I would like to build a new seat of learning, and it was a place which needed a new seat of learning more than any of the other sites which I had inspected.

ACTUALITY IN BEXLEY ACADEMY FOYER

NORTHAM: £3 million from Sir David Garrard, £36 million from the government have turned Thamesmead's failed school into this - a glass and steel palace rising like the corporate headquarters of a finance house. This is Bexley Business Academy. Inside the main entrance is a large open space with the school's own Stock Exchange at the centre, where the head of Business and Economics, Hassan Noor, in his first teaching job, is struggling to make himself heard against the racket coming from the open cafeteria.

ACTUALITY OF CLASS

NOOR: All right, guys. Today we're going to be talking about the wealth effects that originate from stock markets. David, can you start us off? If there's a rise in share prices that creates wealth effects. What kind of effect do you think that has on the economy?

BOY: It'll increase spending in the economy and it'll make people feel that they're richer so they ...

NORTHAM: The response of the students is a model of entrepreneurial vision, in line with the academy's motto: No Goal Is Beyond Our Reach.

SHARIF: My name's Moshin Sharif. I'm in year nine, and I'm learning about stocks and shares.

NORTHAM: Is that a good thing for you to learn?

SHARIF: Yeah it is, yeah.

NORTHAM: And do you find it interesting?

SHARIF: Yeah, it is very interesting.

NORTHAM: Really?

SHARIF: Yeah, it is, yeah, because you get to learn about the ups and downs of stock shares and everything.

NORTHAM: Did you know anything about this before you came to the academy?

SHARIF: No, no, nothing at all. Nothing. All I knew was it goes up and down, that's it.

HARRISON: I'm Poppy Harrison and I'm in year 10, and we've been learning about how businesses create and how they move on and grow to be bigger companies.

NORTHAM: And is that how you see your future?

HARRISON: Yes.

NORTHAM: Running a business?

HARRISON: Definitely, yes.

NORTHAM: Starting a business?

HARRISON: Yes.

WIDDOWS: If we want to break away from bog standard education, then we need to do things differently. I haven't got a number of staff here who are coming in just as stonemasons. They're coming in here as cathedral builders, to make a lasting change, to make a real difference to the people's lives in this area. Now we're not doing that by the traditional methods.

NORTHAM: The principal, Tom Widdows, fosters high aspiration among students who start life with precious little. And in this year's GCSEs, students at Bexley Academy did notably better than their predecessors. But when the government inspectorate Ofsted visited Bexley in June – its first inspection of an academy – it found some grounds for concern. Ofsted's report speaks of 'remarkable progress', a transformed environment, better attendance and behaviour, very good management. But it concludes that the school still had serious weaknesses in two vital areas.

READER IN STUDIO: The overall quality of learning was unsatisfactory. The quality of teaching is unsatisfactory overall.

NORTHAM: This was bad news, and not only for the academy. When the Prime Minister opened Bexley, he declared 'I have seen the future of education and this is it'. Ofsted's finding of serious weaknesses would require it to publish a report on its short visit - potentially embarrassing for both Bexley and the government. But faced with the equivalent of a yellow card from Ofsted, the principal Tom Widdows decided to complain about the referee.

WIDDOWS: Normally on an inspection they would look at your self evaluation, your self review, which we spent days and days doing. They would talk to staff more. But because they were only in for one afternoon and one morning, they had a very limited access to our staff.

NORTHAM: Are you saying Ofsted were wrong about your school?

WIDDOWS: Ofsted were totally wrong about our school.

NORTHAM: You see, they say a lot of things are right about the way you run the academy. They are very flattering about you, they are very flattering about the premises and the facilities. They say the behaviour of the students is very good. But they say there are these two vital weaknesses which are learning and teaching. Now that's the very core of any school's business, isn't it?

WIDDOWS: And that's exactly why they're wrong.

NORTHAM: They're not here as cheerleaders for you. Ofsted are here to see whether you're doing your job properly, and they found that in these vital ways you're not.

WIDDOWS: I don't want them to be cheerleaders, and in fact I'm very happy to have people coming in here and writing a critical report. But what I can't accept is when we've done all that we've done to examination results, they're way above any results ever achieved in the previous 25 year history – almost double what they've achieved – the attendance has risen from 70% to 90% plus, all of those things have happened, violent behaviour has reduced. For them to turn around and be critical of what we've done, we couldn't accept that and we had to argue, we had to say, 'Maybe your inspection process was flawed.'

NORTHAM: Ofsted's response is that Mr Widdows, the principal, is kidding himself, though they put it more politely:

READER IN STUDIO: The academy's self-evaluation underestimates the extent and the seriousness of weaknesses in teaching and learning. Monitoring and evaluation of the quality of education are insufficiently rigorous.

NORTHAM: If Ofsted is used to being an irresistible force, at Bexley it came up against an immovable object in the shape of the Chairman of Governors and sponsor of the Academy, Sir David Garrard. Sir David threatened legal action, instructing a leading barrister, Cherie Booth QC, to prepare grounds for a judicial review of Ofsted's report. Ofsted stood by its conclusions, but said that there had been some confusion at the academy over the status of the inspection and agreed to put its findings

NORTHAM cont: not in a published report but in a letter to the principal. It's a slightly arcane difference, since Ofsted makes this letter publicly available. But this concession was enough to persuade Sir David Garrard to withdraw his legal threat, though not his trenchant critique of Ofsted.

GARRARD: I was outraged. A draft report was produced and submitted to the school. The school responded by making a formal complaint. That draft report was withdrawn and was replaced by a letter.

NORTHAM: Now Ofsted say it hasn't been withdrawn, they say they stand by what's in the letter, that the teaching and learning are unsatisfactory, but that what's happened is the report has not been published. That's not the same as saying it was wrong and has been withdrawn.

GARRARD: Well, you must speak to Ofsted about this.

NORTHAM: I have done.

GARRARD: Well, I repeat, my understanding is that the draft report was withdrawn – I repeat, withdrawn.

NORTHAM: But you're the one who's backed down. You threaten legal action and then don't take it.

GARRARD: No, on the contrary, I think Ofsted backed down, and it is clear that Ofsted backed down, otherwise they would not have withdrawn the original draft report. They can issue as many letters as they like. We can't, as an educational establishment with very limited funds, continue to instigate legal activity against every letter Ofsted, in its wisdom or lack of wisdom, may choose to issue.

NORTHAM: The letter from Ofsted repeats its criticisms of the academy, almost verbatim, using the word 'unsatisfactory' ten times. Ofsted wouldn't be interviewed for this programme, so File On 4 asked for clarification of the original report's status. Had it indeed been withdrawn or merely not published?

READER IN STUDIO: It was merely not published. The findings still stand.

NORTHAM: The position of academy sponsors like Sir David Garrard has itself proved controversial. They put in a relatively small proportion of the building cost of the academy – typically £2m out of a total of £20, £30 or £40 million. The government pays the running costs, while the sponsor gets control of the governing body and takes the Chair. This gives them power over school policy, the appointment of the head, admissions procedures, the grounds and so on. To the Labour MP David Chaytor, on the Commons Education Select Committee, this looks like a rather one-sided bargain.

CHAYTOR: I think it is actually a cheap way of buying disproportionate influence. I'm all in favour of improving the links and the relationships between schools and employers, but to allow one particularly wealthy individual to buy so much influence I think is wrong. It doesn't mean to say that the influence will be used inappropriately, but there is always the risk that it might be.

NORTHAM: So if the government has given this degree of control to business people, what do you say?

CHAYTOR: Well I think it's absolutely ludicrous really, because it just opens the door to all kinds of conflicts of interest. The Chair of the governors obviously has the ultimate say on many things. There is a question of conflicts of interest over the contracts that the academies may choose to enter into, and I think it's potentially quite dangerous and we need to have stronger checks and balances in place.

NORTHAM: The behaviour of some academy sponsors has attracted criticism, and none more so than the case of King's Academy in Middlesbrough.

ACTUALITY OF ASSEMBLY – CHILDREN SINGING

NORTHAM: The King's Academy is sponsored by a fundamentalist Christian group, the Vardy Foundation, which is no stranger to controversy because of its adherence to Creationist teaching as an alternative to Darwin's theory of evolution. From morning assembly onwards, the tone of the school is avowedly religious.

MAN: Thanks very much. Here's a warning from a short story in the Bible. It's a bit like a man who was going on a journey, and he called together his servants and he gave his property ...

NORTHAM: What's now raised eyebrows is the revelation of close financial links between the Chairman of the Governors, Sir Peter Vardy, and his academy. In the glossy Year Book published this summer, the inside front cover is an advertisement for a car dealership, Reg Vardy plc, Sir Peter's family firm. 'Congratulations on your first year', it says, 'from the first in motor retailing'. At the local council there's concern that Sir Peter Vardy's brother, David Vardy, has been paid more than £14,000 for work at the school, the money going through the Billy Graham Association which employed him. In addition, the Vardy car dealership charged the school more than £110,000 for marketing and recruitment. In all, almost £300,000 has gone from the academy to individuals or organisations linked to Sir Peter Vardy. A senior Middlesbrough councillor, Michael Carr, questions the wisdom of these payments.

CARR: I'm sure it's entirely legal, but I've got to say I'm very surprised, because I can't think of any other area of public service where public money can be used in that way. Certainly speaking as a governor of a school, I'm sure I'd be called to account if I was instrumental in ensuring that those sort of amounts of money went to companies that were associated with my family or my ideological organisations.

NORTHAM: If they've provided the services and if the prices are competitive, what's the problem?

CARR: What we would need to consider is whether appropriate declarations of interest have been made, and whether the contracts have been put out into a proper competitive environment. Perhaps if that was the case there might be some justification, but certainly it's something that I've never heard of in any other publicly accountable organisation.

NORTHAM: But these amounts are declared in the accounts of Reg Vardy plc and so on. It's not as if they've been hidden away.

CARR: What we seem to be having is people adopting private business practices but with public money, and I think that there is a concern there that there should be greater accountability, democratic accountability, which quite evidently isn't the case in the way in which academies generally are being run.

NORTHAM: How then does Sir Peter Vardy explain the contracts and payments from his academy to people or bodies connected to him? Like the contract to his brother David.

VARDY: He was at the time working for the Billy Graham Organisation, and we thought the honourable thing to do was to repay the Billy Graham Organisation for the time that he spent on the college.

NORTHAM: And was his post advertised and he had to compete for it, or did you just appoint him?

VARDY: We appointed him because he had the experience. The colleges that he has built have been on time and within budget. The board of directors of the college and the Department of Education were very happy that David was involved.

NORTHAM: Why did your car company get more than £110,000 for marketing and recruitment advice?

VARDY: There was no charge made by the company to the college. What the college was asked to pay for was the media for the advertising in the newspapers when we were recruiting the staff, and obviously all of the printed material that was prepared for the parents, so that they knew all about the college.

NORTHAM: So did any of the contracts that total something just short of £300,000 get put out to either normal recruitment competition or to competitive tender?

VARDY: No. They weren't put out to competitive tender at all.

NORTHAM: Isn't it a question not just of behaving honourably, which you say you have, but of being seen to make it quite clear to everyone that there's no possibility of a conflict of interest?

VARDY: Well the people that have paid the cheques, the Department of Education are happy with what has happened, so there is no question at all in their minds that they've got extremely good value for money and things have been done honourably.

NORTHAM: It was at King's Academy that the Prime Minister praised modern social justice in action. But recent events at King's have led some local educationalists to question whether the academy is really committed to educating the most disadvantaged and most difficult children.

ACTUALITY WITH DIARY

JEANETTE: 28th September 01. My son sat in a corner of the room and picked up a pair of scissors, threw them across the room at another student. He does not seem to understand how dangerous he is. The 11th of the tenth 01. He's squirting water all over students in the hall. When I stopped him, he pushed me against the door frame, banged my head ...

NORTHAM: The previous school log records how, at the age of 13, Jeanette's son was a serious problem. But he never reached the point of being expelled. When he started at King's Academy last year, within two weeks he was on temporary exclusion, and shortly after his first half-term he was expelled. His three breaches of discipline at King's weren't trivial - he was caught smoking, then hit another student and was then caught with the smokers again. But other schools in Middlesbrough say they would not expel a student for those offences, in line with government policy that permanent exclusions should be avoided wherever possible. King's Academy, though, invoked its tight disciplinary code, relations broke down with the boy's mother, Jeanette, and he was expelled, leaving her out of pocket and angry.

JEANETTE: I was so mad. I don't think they give enough time to readjust to everything. A new start, a new school, his uniform was new and he had to join up with another school, so the kids were new.

NORTHAM: He was a problem, clearly, if he was smoking, which is obviously against the academy's rules, and if he hit another student, that's bad behaviour, you can't deny that.

JEANETTE: I know, I'm not saying he's an angel, I've never said my son's an angel, never ever, but I think there should be some leeway sometimes with kids suffering behavioural problems and things.

NORTHAM: What did you say to the academy when they said he was going to be permanently excluded?

JEANETTE: I begged them not to. They told me there was two ways of doing it. Either I could take him out of the school myself or they can permanently exclude him.

NORTHAM: The academy suggested that you could take your son away from the school?

JEANETTE: Yes.

NORTHAM: And what was your reaction?

JEANETTE: I phoned a few education people and asked them what do I do and things, and they told me not to take him out of school because I'm taking education away from my son.

NORTHAM: And so what did you do?

JEANETTE: I told the school, if you have to permanently exclude him, permanently exclude him.

NORTHAM: Jeanette's son wasn't alone. In its first year, King's expelled a total of twenty-seven children. Compared with this number, the seven non-academy secondary schools in Middlesbrough between them expelled only ten. King's also saw up to ten other students withdrawn by their parents under the threat of expulsion. At the local authority, the senior councillor Michael Carr suspects an unsubtle form of passing the buck.

CARR: Certainly there are difficulties with pupils in all schools, but schools generally try to deal with them. Most schools have inclusion policies, they try to ensure that pupils who are difficult are dealt with, and only in the most extreme circumstances are they excluded. It seems to me that in the academies, exclusion has been an option of first resort rather than last resort. I think it's extremely unfair that the other schools then have to pick up the pieces.

NORTHAM: And if that's the case, how does it sit with the academies' stated aim from the Prime Minister, which is that they should deal with some of the most disadvantaged children in the country?

CARR: They do deal with children from disadvantaged areas. It's not good enough if they then say, 'Well the ones who are difficult we will simply get rid of.' That becomes a process of selection post factor. If they are dealing with difficult and disadvantaged children, it's their responsibility to do that, and not palm off the most difficult children or the most disadvantaged children to other schools, because it seems to me that they're not following their remit in that case.

NORTHAM: Why then did King's expel so many children, twenty-seven of them? The principal, Nigel McQuoid, accepts that his style of discipline is more strict than usual.

MCQUOID: One of the things that our foundation believes very strongly in is that in running a school you should think like a parent. What do parents want?

NORTHAM: Well they don't throw their children out. They keep them in the family.

MCQUOID: Parents in their own family at home? Sure, of course.

NORTHAM: But you've expelled these twenty-seven.

MCQUOID: What I'm very concerned is that in that holistic provision across Middlesbrough and across any of our towns, everybody is working to establish the very best they can for everybody. So rather than thinking a school, in excluding somebody, is kicking them out of the family, we're trying to move them into another place within the family of Middlesbrough whereby they can get the best thing for them.

NORTHAM: Can you understand why the local authority and other heads in Middlesbrough would think that you've had a number of difficult children, you've pushed them out the door here and someone else has had to pick up the strain of their education?

MCQUOID: I think every school working within any environment has, from time to time, children who come to them having left other schools.

NORTHAM: But these are schools that aren't expelling or moving on anything like twenty-seven children in a year.

MCQUOID: No, I accept that, and they are what I would call mature schools. We are just over one year old, we are developing a reputation, we are developing our ethos, we are establishing what we are trying to stand for.

NORTHAM: So when you expelled these twenty-seven children, you're effectively acknowledging that this put a burden on other schools and on the local education authority, but your response seems to be, well that's tough.

MCQUOID: We believe this is a blip in establishing a level of discipline that wasn't here before.

NORTHAM: The more than thirty children who left King's Academy became the responsibility of the local education authority, and many were sent to other schools, arriving as problems for headteachers like Richard Bain. And by a perverse bit of bureaucracy, when he takes in a child, he doesn't get that year's money for them - that's retained by the academy that expelled them.

BAIN: It seems very unfair. I think that when you're dealing with very difficult children and very difficult situations, your concern is not the money. Your concern is how can this child be supported and how can we turn the child round so that they can achieve successfully? I do think, however, that had the academies had the discipline of knowing that they were losing £3,000 every time they excluded a child, they would not have been excluding twenty-seven children.

NORTHAM: Well we're talking about £80,000 or more for one year alone at one academy.

BAIN: Yes. If you translate it into staffing, it's two and a half teachers. And I think that if they'd had the discipline of having to focus on the cost of it, they would have had a very different policy.

ACTUALITY IN MIDDLESBROUGH

NORTHAM: King's is one of two academies in Middlesbrough. The other one, Unity City Academy, is here in one of the most deprived areas to the east of the centre. It too has expelled a large number of students - eighteen in year one and then sixteen last year. So while the academies have between them expelled sixty-one students, the total from all other secondary schools in the borough combined is just fifteen. Statistically, the expulsion of difficult students probably means getting rid of some of the most disadvantaged. File On 4 asked the distinguished academic, Professor Stephen Gorard of York University, who has access to the Department for Education's own census data for schools, to analyse the population of students at Unity City Academy in Middlesbrough to determine if they are still the most disadvantaged group of local children. As a measure of poverty, Professor Gorard took the number entitled to free school meals and compared it with the number in the main local school before the creation of the academy in 2002.

GORARD: In Middlesbrough in 1997, the school that was to form the basis for the academy clearly took the highest proportion of children from disadvantaged families. 60% of the students were eligible for a free school meal, so we're talking about a school that clearly has high levels of disadvantage. It is the highest level of disadvantage of all the schools in this vicinity, and it retained that and remained the most disadvantaged school until 2001.

NORTHAM: And when it became an academy, what happened?

GORARD: There was an absolute decline in the number of children in free school meals, so the proportion went down to 47%. More significantly is that it almost halved the share of local children that it took. There were now four other schools in the area that took a higher proportion of children for free school meals than it did.

NORTHAM: And has that continued in its second year as an academy?

GORARD: It has. It's still the case that it's no longer the most disadvantaged school in its area.

NORTHAM: And it was, up until becoming an academy?

GORARD: It was, and it has been for as many years as I've looked at.

NORTHAM: Professor Gorard considered why this shift might have happened, and concludes that it is probably related to the academy's practice on admissions and exclusions. It fits a pattern he's established in past research - that schools taken out of local authority control come to serve children who are predominantly not the most disadvantaged.

GORARD: I think this is too short term to be due to a change in local population, social and economic changes, so it's most likely something to do with the intake to the school, the allocation of school places, and it's also possible, of course, that by the time the annual school census was taken in January, that some of the students had been excluded.

NORTHAM: Could this have happened by accident?

GORARD: I think you would have to look with considerable suspicion at the school allocation procedure. They have fewer problem pupils, so their raison d'être would have been destroyed.

NORTHAM: At Unity City Academy, where this shift away from educating the most disadvantaged children has already occurred, the Chief Executive Michael Griffiths is at a loss to explain it.

GRIFFITHS: The admissions policy at the academy is very very clear. Those criteria are published in the prospectus, and the first major criteria is the local community to this academy. It could well be that the local community has found the academy more attractive and isn't seeking provision out of the area, but in terms of the admissions policy of the academy there is no obvious reason why that should have taken place.

NORTHAM: You haven't deliberately sought to attract less difficult children?

GRIFFITHS: No. There would be no way of knowing that on their application, and the criteria are very open, very straightforward and they're mainly geographically-linked.

NORTHAM: Evidence from the other two original academies is mixed. Professor Gorard at York found one, Bexley, has stuck to its brief and still has the same proportion of disadvantaged children as the previous local school. The other, in Haringey, did not historically have the highest levels of disadvantage in the borough, and

MILIBAND: It's nonsense to suggest that the Unity Academy has become a centre for the affluent middleclass in Teesside.

NORTHAM: That's not what I'm saying.

MILIBAND: It serves some of the most disadvantaged children. I think if you look at the seventeen open academies that there are, at the others that are in train, there is absolutely no question that they are serving predominantly disadvantaged young people.

NORTHAM: There can be little doubt that the academies opened to date do make spectacular sights, and that some at least have raised not only their students' aspirations but also their performance. They'll be put to the test in a succession of future Ofsted reports. More fundamentally though, if a number of successful academies are found no longer to recruit the most disadvantaged groups of children, the government's justification for concentrating billions of pounds on a few select independent schools will begin to ring hollow.

SIGNATURE TUNE