

13<sup>th</sup> September 2011



Chi Onwurah MP  
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Dear Ms Onwurah



Thank you for copying me into your letter to Jackie McHanwell, Chair of Governors. I am sure that all the Governors will give your views serious thought. I know that you are a great supporter of your old school and I respect your view. However, you raise some interesting issues, to which I would like to contribute another perspective.



It seems to me that Government policy is misguided on this and some other educational issues. For example, I think it is quite wrong and unacceptable for private individuals to be able to buy influence over state education, as with sponsored academies (although that is a policy which has continued unchallenged by all three political parties). That is not, of course, the issue with converter academies, which are not sponsored or privatised, as some accounts wrongly suggest. They are independent state schools. There may be a good argument for state schools becoming more fully independent, a process which was begun in the 1980s with Local Management of Schools and which the academies programme would complete, if rolled out across all schools. I think there is a case for this, at least with secondary schools, since the original LMS programme demonstrably raised the quality of our state schools in general, leading to more innovation, higher standards and greater efficiency. Incidentally it included greater freedom to set differing staffing structures (and it is staff issues that are causing the most anxiety here). That freedom did not result in worse pay and conditions for teachers or support staff in schools; nor will the academies programme do so. Much of Kenton's current success has been due to seeking more independent control, in order to innovate for the benefit of our students. We have been trail-blazers in curriculum and professional development and transition partnerships, to name just a few, often cutting corners or breaking national and local guidelines to meet our students' needs, frequently later being sited as offering 'best practice' in those areas. It is quite true that we have been able to do this under the current arrangements, but often more slowly or less completely than we wished, because of external obstacles. I regret to say that we have also sometimes been powerless to stop public money being wasted on low impact projects.



However, although I see greater independence for state schools as broadly beneficial, the way that the Government is introducing it is seriously flawed. It creates situations like this, at Kenton, where colleagues, Governors and elected members with a common purpose find themselves in opposed camps, wasting energy over arguments about structural reform rather than teaching and learning, because of the artificial creation of a politically charged environment. If it is national



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policy for state schools to be given greater independence, then that policy should be tested in a local pilot or two and the amended result rolled out across all schools fairly. In other words we should not be asked to choose our fate in this way. For (presumably) political reasons the Government has chosen this haphazard and potentially unfair method of introduction.



What the Governors and I cannot do, however, is to fold our arms and claim neutrality. The political environment forces us to make a decision and we have a duty to make a judgment on which decision would be more likely to be in the long term interests of our present and future students and their community. It is not possible to stay where we are, because the landscape is changing so rapidly around us. At September 1<sup>st</sup> over 30% (more than 1000) of all the country's state secondary schools had either converted to academy status or applied to do so; their names are on the DFE website. Although the North East has not been as keen so far, 22 NE schools are on the list and I know of several others that soon intend to be. It has been suggested that this will create a two-tier system. Not if schools led in good faith, like Kenton, get involved, but, even if that were true, would we want to volunteer to perpetuate the traditional pattern, where the schools populated by advantage form the upper tier, while complex urban schools like Kenton 'know their place'? We do not accept that lower ranking for our students and nor should our community.



I think you are misreading our statement to parents if you see the main advantage given as financial. It is rightly ranked last in the list of advantages, and it is made clear that we do not know how long it will continue, but it cannot be ignored. The £740,000 additional funding that a Newcastle school like Kenton would receive in this financial year is, according to my understanding, only the central services share appropriate to the size of the school. The LA's resources would be reduced, but the schools and students needing those services would be reduced proportionately. There are, of course problems of efficient planning and reduced economies of scale which the LA has to deal with and I sympathize with their difficulties.



My colleagues and I have always worked closely and well with the LA and will continue to do so; our use of the word 'decline' was not a value judgment, simply a description of the changing and reducing responsibilities and financial arrangements for local government which Whitehall has decreed, not only under this Government but under the last, also. Indeed for many years now Governments of all parties have been preparing us for the transition for LAs from provision to commissioning, which will continue. However, often schools and LAs (not Newcastle in particular) have different perspectives and priorities from one another, whether in integrated services or in school building, to name just two examples. We know that we could use those centrally reserved resources in a more focused and efficient manner to meet our students' needs.



The most difficult issue you raise is the question of accountability and I acknowledged that the long term accountability framework for academies is not entirely clear, as the YPLA reaches the end of its short life and the EFA is introduced. It is of course hugely important that schools are publicly accountable for the public



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money they spend and their discharge of the heavy responsibility they carry for young people's education. The fact is, however, that English schools and their leaders (including academies) have never been so accountable for their outcomes, measured against national standards in performance tables and by the Ofsted inspection framework. The pressure is enormous to raise standards and produce results. In principle that is a positive development, although sadly it is rarely intelligent enough to recognize sufficiently the varied contexts within which schools operate. These are national accountability measures and the only significant role which LAs play in holding even their own schools to account for performance, is their duty to monitor national standards within their locality and to intervene when schools fail to meet those national standards. Local councils no longer have political control over even LA schools and it was not necessarily positive for children's life-chances when they did. Meanwhile, schools are more accountable than ever at the very local level of the students' families and the immediate local community, particularly by exercising informed school choice.



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Finally, your last sentence rightly implies that Kenton has a (shared) responsibility for the long term health of our city and region. I agree strongly and have personally shown that commitment, through the work I have done outside Kenton, for example as voluntary Chair of Schools NorthEast, which I helped to found, by leading the Newcastle Education Improvement Partnership (in its early phase) and by other local and regional leadership work. More widely, Kenton School and its excellent senior leaders and other staff have led improvement work across Newcastle, for example in Kenton's primary/secondary transition programme which has been adopted across the city so successfully. We are well known as a school for our openness in sharing our innovation for the benefit of all. Any anxiety that our interest in converting to academy status marks a reversal of this approach is a misreading of our intentions. The clearest evidence of this is our recent move to involve all our main feeder primary schools in a joint academy submission. This joint approach was our preference, inspired by the vision of a pattern of interlinked school partnerships across the area, sharing a common community purpose. As you know, we could not achieve unanimity on this approach at this point in time, but I still see something like this as the long term future; we need to use this government initiative 'subversively' to form a more dynamic local educational partnership.



These are my thoughts on the issues you raise. Other Governors will have their own views and, whatever their decision, I will implement it professionally and to the best of my ability.

Yours sincerely



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