

LESSONS in charity

Could RNIB and the NAS have productive roles to play in the government's free schools and academies programme? **Annie Makoff** finds out...

In September, Coventry-based Three Spires School became the first special school to convert to a charity-sponsored SEN (special educational needs) academy. Now known as the Three Spires Academy, it's run by the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), who announced the sponsorship in August this year.

The National Autistic Society (NAS), who sponsor a network of free schools and academies through the existing NAS Academies Trust, recently opened Reading-based NAS Thames Valley Free School for children with autism.

Academies – existing schools which are funded by the Department for Education (DfE) and are outside of local authority control – have been in existence since 2002, but under the Academies Act 2010, all schools now have the opportunity to become academies. Free schools on the other hand, are brand new academies, set up by various groups such as parents, charities and trusts.

“You don't enter into academy sponsorship to balance the books,”

Flood is deeply concerned that after years of progress for inclusive education, the government's agenda is ‘reversing the trend’, thanks to the huge growth in academy chains

that are opening more special academies.

“We are starting to see a huge increase in segregated education and a decrease in

inclusion. Schools are increasingly concerned about their league table positions, and as academies are no longer obliged to accept children with SEN as maintained schools are, more will start refusing places. It is becoming a one-way ticket out of mainstream education and into this new breed of segregated schools.”

And segregation, according to Flood, leads to segregation in adult life. The culture within these environments, she says, is all about ‘fixing’ and ‘correcting’ impairments. The disability is perceived as negative.

Reversing the trend?

According to the DfE, two thirds of schools have now converted to academy status or are in the pipeline to do so, and 89 special schools have become academies since 2011, when special schools were first given the opportunity to convert. But following a spate of media coverage, a YouGov poll found that public support for free schools has dropped from 36% to 27%.

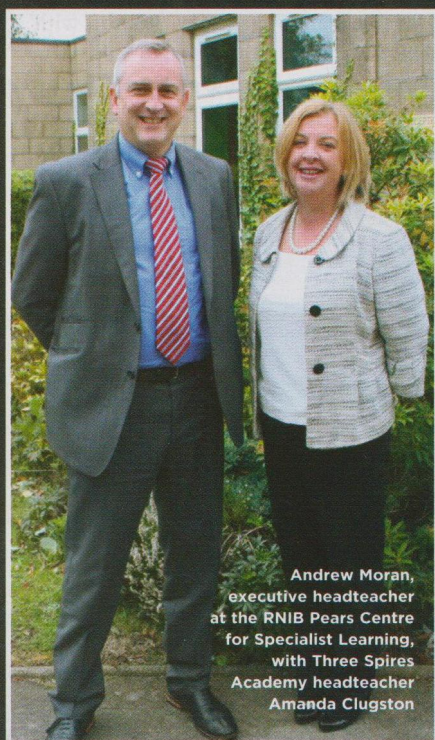
Tara Flood, Director of the Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE) and one of the main critics of the government's free schools agenda, believes the growth of SEN academies is ‘a dark day for inclusion,’ arguing that ‘new pots of money’ is the prime motivation behind school sponsorship.

“It's shameful that these disabilities charities who claim to be supportive of inclusive education are seeing financial opportunities for themselves,” she says. “They claim to be Disabled Peoples' Organisations, but real DPOs work towards inclusion and human rights. That isn't an organisation that would then set up a SEN free school.”

Catering to demand

But Ben Higgins, Education Development Lead at the NAS Academies Trust, does not agree that increased specialist school provision leads to segregation. The idea behind free schools, he argues, is to address a local need. If parents are unhappy with the provision in their area, free school legislation allows parents or other groups to set up a school themselves, with funding from the DfE.

In the case of the NAS, the specialist free schools they run have been set up in response to parent demand in areas that have little or no SEN provision. In the past, it was deemed acceptable for children to travel miles from the family home to attend placements in



Andrew Moran, executive headteacher at the RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning, with Three Spires Academy headteacher Amanda Clugston

specialist schools, but as Higgins points out, this is no longer necessary.

"43% of children attend an autism specialist school out of their local area," he says. "And often these placements are residential. But the free schools that we set up and sponsor in areas of the highest need provide a means of addressing this. Children can attend schools in their local area which better cater for their needs."

The main issue for Higgins and the NAS though, are the high numbers of children with autism being excluded from mainstream schools because of the lack of support and understanding about their behaviour. The NAS says that one in five children with autism have been excluded from mainstream placements and two thirds of those children have been excluded more than once.

"We are not saying that every child should attend a specialist school," Higgins says. "And yes, we do support inclusive education. But this is not always possible or appropriate for every child – some have high levels of anxiety, or severe social or communication problems which can't be adequately addressed in mainstream education."

Spectrum of provision

That's a view shared by Andrew Moran, Executive Headteacher at the RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning, who talks about a 'spectrum of provision'. Although he, like Higgins, fully supports inclusive education, the reality is somewhat different. Some areas – and schools – have better SEN provision than others, and some children will actually struggle in mainstream placements.

For Moran, the opportunity to sponsor the Three Spires Academy was one that reflected the RNIB's goals and ethos, and despite media speculation, Moran insists it has no financial benefit whatsoever to the charity.

"You don't enter into academy sponsorship to balance the books," he says. As with the schools sponsored by the NAS Academies Trust, the RNIB is responding to a local need. The Three Spires Academy is a local resource providing specialist, local SEN provision in Coventry. It may be run by a vision charity, but it caters for children with a wide range of needs.

Both the RNIB and the NAS have strong backgrounds in providing specialist education, so are well placed to provide support to those with SEN. The RNIB in particular can trace its expertise in education back to the 1920s. In fact, the RNIB Pears Centre is doing so well that a recent OFSTED inspection deemed it 'outstanding'.



The NAS Academies Trust recently opened Thames Valley Free School in Reading

Accountability concerns

But parent Melanie King, whose two children attended the Discovery New School in Crawley, West Sussex, is concerned about the lack of accountability among free schools in general. Their independence from local education authorities means there is no one to complain to if there is a problem.

King alleges that the head teacher of the school – who had no formal teaching qualifications and resigned from the post in October this year – lied to parents about the whereabouts of the school's SENCO (SEN Co-ordinator). The SENCO was absent for over a year, and despite diagnosing King's daughter with dyslexia, provided no support whatsoever.

"I was banging my head against a brick wall," King recalls. "25% of the children at the school had special needs, so to not have a SENCO beggars belief. The head teacher dealt with problems by screaming at both pupils and parents, and even physically restrained one child before excluding her. It's fair to say that my children's education, and that of the other children at the school, was neglected for two years."

Although King welcomes disability charities setting up free schools, rather than individuals as was the case with Discovery New School, she remains cautious about the long-term implications. "The fact is, under the

Concerned parent, Melanie King: "It's fair to say that my children's education, and that of the other children at the school, was neglected for two years"



government's agenda there is no legal requirement to have any teaching qualifications, so anyone can set up a free school. Charities running such schools should have the right skill sets and experience, that's absolutely crucial."

Andrew Moran, who'd like to see more disability charities get involved in SEN schools, agrees. "Disability charities can really bring something to the sector because of their specialisms and expertise," he says. "So I hope that the RNIB is leading the way in this. And from another perspective, it's good for such organisations to get involved in SEN schools, rather than leaving it to others who may have different motivations. Specialist education run by specialists for the good of the child – that's what it should be about."

