

Scrapping the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme and expanding the Academy Act will bring a brighter future for schools and the economy

To address the challenging economic situation the Government has reduced public sector spending by billions of pounds. Part of the plan includes axing of all Building Schools for the Future (BSF) projects that have not yet reached financial close, leaving the future uncertain for many schools and companies working in the public sector.

While these changes have caused, understandably, much concern the coalition government has announced the expansion of the Academy programme. Yolanta Gill CEO of European Electronique comments on the changing economic outlook and the benefits that the Academy Act may bring.

The Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme had many disadvantages for both schools and suppliers. It was a 'One Size Fits All' scheme, limiting the ambitions of many schools. Money previously wasted on the costly BSF bidding process can now be spent on refurbishing schools, providing ICT services and supporting education. This also re-opens doors to smaller, suppliers, giving the school leadership team greater flexibility over their ICT supply and encouraging greater innovation.

Despite huge investment and an exceptional track record as a medium sized privately owned company, we found breaking into the BSF programme challenging and cost prohibitive as it appeared to be designed for much larger players.

On the other hand, the introduction of the new Academies Bill can offer significant benefits to those in the education circle.

While there's no doubting that the expansion of the Academy programme has been met with mixed response, the Act has freed up schools to make positive decisions that affect the learners, staff and their communities. A wider range of schools can now apply for academy status - the tag of a failing school becoming an academy has gone - and now Primary, Secondary, successful and even maintained schools can apply for academy status. But the freedom to make decisions runs deeper than this. Schools can now re-design a curriculum fit for 21st century learners. They are free to try out innovative ideas and place greater emphasis on the areas that matter to them most.

With the new Academies Bill many schools now have the potential to free themselves from Local Authority control and services, recovering on average 10% of their top sliced budget. These funds can be used to procure services in accordance with schools individual desires and plans and from organisations with which they choose to work. This in turn, we hope, will result in better provision of ICT solutions and services.

However, while Academy status does give schools the freedom of choice the real key to success is in visionary leadership. Even with limited amount of funds but with plenty of determination traditional learning can be transformed to deliver a 21st century learning environment. It's not necessarily about new buildings and shiny ICT kit but about a clear strategy for achieving educational vision.

This is a very exciting time to be working with academies. There are visionary staff and Head Teachers who may have found the previous legislation and Local Authority control constraining. With the new playing field the sky is the limit.

For example, I visited one of our academies in Kent recently where classrooms had gone and were replaced with an ICT rich open learning environment. The atmosphere of learning was breath taking. When considered carefully, innovation in ICT can be a powerful tool that will benefit learners.

In this current climate of cuts to funding, which will most probably include reductions in ICT spend, can schools still achieve their vision? Choosing the right path will be even more important than ever before. There is no doubt that many schools will have to make difficult choices. This will include a decision whether to rebuild or refurbish; a consideration of how some services and new equipment can be secured through the right balance of capital and revenue funding; an introduction of efficiency savings through appropriate use of ICT and a consideration to invest in new technologies such as Thin Client, VDI, Cloud Computing in order to save costs.

But overall, I believe the decision to scrap BSF and change the Academy Act will bring a brighter future for schools and the economy.

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