

Free schools, UTCs and studio schools

A briefing for UNISON activists and organisers

In England, there are several types of new school emerging which have the same status as academies. These include free schools, university technical colleges (UTCs) and studio schools.

UNISON is firmly opposed to the steps being taken to drive schools toward academy status. Instead, we believe in good, local schools that are part of a national comprehensive education system and which are accountable to local communities.

What are free schools, UTCs and studio schools?

Free schools, UTCs and studio schools are all set up as academies. However, unlike academies which are existing schools that have become academies, free schools UTCs and studio schools are brand new schools. Like academies they are funded directly by central government and are divorced from the local authority. They are run by a charitable company which controls the school's land and assets, and appoints the governing body and headteacher. And just like other academies, these schools can set their own pay and conditions, admissions policies and curriculum.

Unlike academies which are existing schools that have changed status; free schools, UTCs and studio schools are brand new schools. In the majority of cases staff are newly-appointed (unlike in academies where staff are transferred) and staff are employed by the governing body or trust which oversees the school and which sets the contract of employment, pay, terms and conditions.

Free schools, UTCs and studio schools are funded using public money – and they cannot make a profit. However, like all state schools, they can subcontract elements of the running and management of the school to other organisations, including private companies. Already, some private companies from the UK and abroad have secured contracts to run free schools, and it is likely that in time the government will formally allow these companies to make a profit from schools.

Free Schools

Free schools are new schools which can be set up in response to local demand. They can include primary and secondary schools, as well as special schools and alternative provision schools. They can be located in traditional school buildings or community spaces such as office buildings or church halls.

When promoting the idea of free schools the government stressed that these schools would be set up by parents. In reality, parent-led groups have been in the minority, with the majority of free schools being set up by existing independent schools, faith groups, businesses or academy sponsors.

UNISON is very concerned that the misuse of admissions criteria could allow some free schools to pick and choose their pupils. There is already evidence that some free schools favour the better off and have a lower proportion of children eligible for free school meals than neighbouring schools. UNISON does not see the need for free schools and we do not accept that they should be part of a state-funded school system.

There is also a risk that free schools will add additional complexity and extra costs to the school system, especially if they are in areas where they produce additional unnecessary school places.

Studio Schools

Studio schools are academies for 14-19 year olds that deliver project-based or practical learning, often including work experience with local businesses. They are small schools - typically with around 300 pupils – and focus on developing ‘employability skills’ such as customer service and team working. Some studio schools run on business hours rather than the standard school day.

University Technical Colleges

University technical colleges (UTCs) are technical academies for 14-19 year olds. They are sponsored by universities, often in partnership with businesses and FE colleges. UTCs specialise in technical subjects such as engineering, construction and digital technology. Several UTCs are sponsored by large multinational companies such as JCB, Virgin Atlantic, Jaguar Land Rover and Sony Music. Some UTCs run on business hours rather than the standard school day.

Tips for activists and organisers

- Use any local avenues to get information about free schools, UTCs or studio schools that are planned in your area.
- Keep in touch with your local UNISON branch and regional/area organisers so that you can access advice and help to share the latest information.
- Lobby the governing body to ensure that a comprehensive consultation involving parents, school staff and the wider community, is undertaken before plans are finalised for any new school. You may wish to establish links with the wider community to build opposition against a new school and alert your local councillors and MPs of your concerns.
- Where possible, ensure that recognition and facility time agreements are in place in new schools. The TUC guidance on establishing trade union recognition in academies may be a helpful starting point. You can find it here: <http://www.unison.org.uk/education/academies/>
- Encourage support staff to join UNISON. Use the materials on the UNISON Schools webpages to help you: www.unison.org.uk/education/schools
- Identify UNISON members who can act as a workplace representative or contact and give members a voice in their school.
- Find out more about the organisations that are sponsoring or working in partnership with the school. These may include businesses, charities, faith groups, universities, colleges and academies. Use the internet and also check UNISON’s Bargaining Information System (BIS) at: www.unison.org.uk/bargaining/bis

Useful links:

- UNISON Schools website – information on academies
www.unison.org.uk/education/schools
- Department for Education - information on schools that are open or in development
<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/technical>
- Edubase – database of educational establishments in England by name, location or type.
<http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/edubase>
- Baker Dearing Educational Trust – information on University Technology Colleges
<http://www.utcolleges.org/>
- Studio Schools Trust - information on studio schools
<http://studioschoolstrust.org/>