

Do major sponsors contribute to school improvement and higher standards?

- *There are differences between academy sponsors, but even within individual chains there is very little consistency in achievement, equity or curriculum. It is difficult to see any impact which might be due to the involvement of the major sponsor.*
- *Although disadvantaged pupils tend to do better, on average, under these sponsors than in other academies, their attainment is still lower than in non-academy schools. The attainment of disadvantaged pupils is of concern in half of the academies run by major sponsors.*
- *The use of equivalent GCSE qualifications on average is as high for the chains as in other academies, and particularly high in some chains and academies.*
- *In over a third of the chain academies, 30% or fewer disadvantaged pupils achieved 5ACemEQ. In half the chain academies, 20% or fewer disadvantaged pupils achieved 5ACemG.*

One of the most dramatic shifts in academy governance has been the management of chains of academies by major sponsors, a new form of edu-business (albeit often registered as charities). By September 2010 there were seven larger chains, defined here by the criterion of controlling five or more schools listed in the 2011 results. Altogether this involved a total of 72 schools (61 of which had been opened by September 2009), i.e. an average of 10 per sponsor. In March 2012 there were already 14 chains controlling a total of 171 open academies, and in addition numerous smaller organisations with three or four academies open so far and more due to open soon. Despite the patchy results outlined below, the Government has encouraged the rapid growth of these multi-sponsors so that several of them are now running 20-30 schools each. So far, unlike the Swedish ‘free schools’, they are not allowed to make a profit, though there are many ways of charging for services rendered (see National Audit Office report, p40). Some of the chains conduct their businesses nationally, while others focus on a local area.

What follows is not intended as a thorough evaluation of each of the major sponsors but is designed to test the Government’s claim that handing over even more schools to such organisations will improve standards and prevent underachievement. We do not wish to suggest incompetence or malpractice in any of these organisations, but rather to raise questions about the Government’s faith in privatising the management of public services.

We also reiterate that our analysis is not a criticism of the staff of individual academies. We have no doubt that they include many dedicated teachers who work conscientiously in their pupils’ best interests within the structures available to them.

The record of academy chains

It has been claimed that major sponsors are particularly effective, yet attainment data for chains of academies is remarkably similar to academies in general. In chains of academies run by major sponsors, the use of GCSE ‘equivalents’ is higher than in other academies, and much higher than for other schools. They are also less successful in terms of EBacc; indeed the average for academies run by major sponsors is only a quarter of the national average for maintained mainstream schools.

Attainment for all pupils in academies (2011 results)

	5ACemEQ	5ACemG	EBacc subjects
Open by 2010	50%	38%	8%
Open by 2009	48%	35%	6%
Open by 2006	51%	40%	8%
<i>Academy chains</i>	<i>50%</i>	<i>36%</i>	<i>4%</i>

Disadvantaged pupils do somewhat better on the 5ACemG measure than in other academies, but below the national average for maintained mainstream schools.

Attainment for disadvantaged pupils in academies (2011 results)

	5ACemEQ	5ACemG
Open by 2010	33%	20%
Open by 2009	34%	24%
Open by 2006	40%	30%
<i>Academy chains</i>	<i>40%</i>	<i>26%</i>

Preventing low achievement

There is considerable variation among academies run by major sponsors, so that it is difficult to believe that sponsorship in itself helps to bring about improved performance. In over a third of the chain academies, 30% or fewer disadvantaged pupils achieved 5ACemEQ, and in half the chain academies 20% or less achieved 5ACemG.

On the basis of the 2011 results some differences emerge between the different groups, though this should not be seen as conclusive given quite small numbers of schools in some chains. The average within each chain for five or more A*-Cs including English and Maths by GCSEs alone (5ACemG) runs from 29% to 53%, and for disadvantaged pupils it ranges from 16% to 42%. The highest performing chains have over 60% of pupils achieving 5ACemEQ, but one of these drops to 42% by GCSEs alone (5ACemG).

The percentage of disadvantaged pupils achieving 5ACemG in academies run by major sponsors is below the national level. This raises the question of what benefit such chains are bringing to these pupils.

Inconsistent results: gaming and floor targets

In every one of these chains, what the Secretary of State calls ‘gaming’ is double the national average for maintained schools. In two of the seven chains, the statistic for A*-Cs including English and Maths is inflated through the use of equivalents by 15 percentage points, and in a third by 19 percentage points. This level of ‘gaming’ has clearly not deterred the Department for Education from handing many more schools to these sponsors.

Academies run by the major sponsors are less likely to fall below the Government’s floor target than other academies, though at 1 in 18 this is still twice the rate as for all schools nationally. But for the zealous use of ‘equivalent’ qualifications 1 in 3 would probably do so. (For a more detailed explanation, please see the later section *Does academy status prevent schools falling below floor targets?*)

In the following examples we will anonymise these organisations as Sponsors A-G. However all seven major sponsors are covered in what follows.

Sponsor A: a tale of two schools

One major academy sponsor, which we will call sponsor A, prides itself on closing the gap between disadvantaged pupils and the rest, and on the surface appears to have succeeded. A closer look at individual schools in this group points to problems lying underneath that claim.

Two of its academies have the same proportion of disadvantaged pupils, 46%. These disadvantaged pupils do just as well as other pupils on the 5AcemEQ score but problems emerge when we look at how the two schools manage it.

	5ACemEQ		5ACemG	
	All pupils	Disadv.	All pupils	Disadv.
Academy 1	69%	70%	53%	54%
Academy 2	67%	67%	22%	28%

Both of these academies make heavy use of ‘equivalents’, but in academy 2 it is particularly extreme, with a gap of 45 percentage points. Academy 1 is very successful in terms of 5ACemG but in academy 2 very few pupils achieve their higher grades through real GCSEs.

The contrast between academies 1 and 2 reaches into the curriculum. Both are highly successful in terms of English and Maths; in both schools, a remarkable 70% achieved A*-C in English and 80% in Maths. In both schools over half sat a double GCSE Science; in academy 1 almost all achieved an A*-C grade, but in academy 2 only a quarter did so. Only a fifth took a language at either school, and

most of these pupils achieved A*-Cs. In academy 1 *a third of pupils* took History or Geography, but in academy 2 only *one pupil* did.

This multi-sponsor, despite its claim to have closed the disadvantage gap, shows a worrying range between its various academies on the GCSE-only statistic among disadvantaged pupils: 11%, 26%, 28%, 54% and 55%. One academy in this chain has 19% of its pupils attaining the EBacc subjects; the others have between 0 and 5%.

Sponsor B

On the surface, it appears that this chain of academies are doing well, but this may be largely the result of good business sense in identifying schools to close down and take over. In nearly half of this chain of academies, the school it replaced was already showing good attainment before it was closed down, and the 2011 results for these particular academies are actually lower than before, after controlling for the upward shift in all maintained schools (TN2). One of this chain (2011 results) has only 5% of disadvantaged pupils reaching 5ACemG, and another 9%.

Sponsor C

This chain, which shows the lowest 5ACem scores with or without equivalents, has one academy where disadvantaged students do exceptionally well. Over half its pupils classify as disadvantaged, and 45% of these disadvantaged pupils achieve five or more actual *GCSEs* at A*-C including English and Maths (5ACemG). We cannot however ascribe the success of this remarkable school to its academy status, since attainment was equally high before it became an academy. This school makes virtually no use of ‘equivalent’ qualifications to achieve its results.

By contrast, a neighbouring academy in the same chain with similar 5ACemEQ results and apparently strong improvement, has a 28 percentage points gap between EQ and G scores (46% / 18%). In other words, less than half the pupils with five or more A*-Cs with English and maths *or equivalent* achieved this through five higher-level *GCSEs*.

Sponsor D

This organisation achieves high 5AcemEQ results in almost half its schools but through the extensive use of equivalents. One academy’s score of 75% for five A*-Cs with English and Maths with equivalents reduces to 46% without, while another falls from 50% to 29%. All this chain’s schools appear at first to be improving more than maintained schools in general, but in half this is heavily exaggerated by the exploitation of equivalents.

Sponsor E

Only one of the academies run by this multi-sponsor is below the 35% A*-C GCSE ‘floor’, though four more probably would be were it not for ‘equivalents’. In two cases, there is a gap of 25 percentage points between ‘with equivalents’ and ‘by GCSEs alone’.

Sponsor F

No academies in this group are below the floor, but for half of them this is due to extensive use of 'equivalents'. Less than 2% of pupils in this multi-sponsor's chain of academies achieved the five EBacc subjects.

Sponsor G

In this large chain, which has been in the business of running academies almost from the start of the academies programme in 2002, use of equivalents is somewhat less than the other groups but with enormous internal variation. In one of its academies serving a very deprived population, 69% of *all* pupils gain 5ACem with equivalents (5ACemEQ) and 63% of the *disadvantaged* pupils achieve it by GCSEs only (5ACemG). At the opposite extreme, in another of its academies, 55% with equivalents drops to 18% by GCSEs alone.

The impact of major sponsors

As the above examples show, there are some good achievements among academies controlled by major sponsors, but also results which give rise to significant concern. This is no different from schools generally, and it is very difficult to understand, among all the inconsistency, where the elusive 'academies effect' might be found. Just as the final evaluation by PriceWaterhouseCooper (2008) failed to find an 'academies effect', we have been unable to find a Brand X or Sponsor Y effect.

Doubtless there are cases where a sponsor's involvement has led to the appointment of some highly successful school leaders and teachers – as also occurs in local authority schools through the involvement of experienced educational advisers. There could, unfortunately, also be cases where a sponsor's 'zero tolerance' style of management may have led some head teachers to engage in excesses of 'gaming' in order to conceal their inability to work miracles.