

How well do disadvantaged pupils achieve in academies?

- *Academy status does not assist disadvantaged pupils, who do no better in academies than in other schools. Without the 'equivalent' qualifications, they do significantly worse.*
- *The progress from age 11 to age 16 of pupils with low KS2 attainment is only marginally better in academies than elsewhere.*

The relatively low achievement of disadvantaged pupils compared to others (see TN4) is a serious problem for English schools. In 2011, 33.9% of disadvantaged pupils achieved five A*-C grades including English and Maths or equivalent, compared with 58.2% of all pupils in maintained schools. The difference has remained almost constant for five years, narrowing only from 27.9 percentage points in 2007 to 27.4 in 2011 (Department for Education SFR 03/2012, page 6) (see TN5).

Unfortunately schools minister Nick Gibb (Department for Education press note 26.1.2012) has chosen to blame schools and teachers, rather than education policies or indeed the scandalous extent of child poverty. To prove his point he referred to 20 schools where 80 percent or more of their disadvantaged pupils achieved five or more A*-C grades. He was perhaps unaware that almost all of these schools were either grammar schools which only admit very high achievers, or comprehensive schools in more privileged areas with very few disadvantaged pupils. It is unhelpful to exaggerate the extent to which schools can make a difference, or indeed to scapegoat teachers for the problems of a society with such severe levels of child poverty.

Some schools can be more successful in supporting disadvantaged students than others, though by nothing like as much as Gibb suggests. There are a variety of reasons for this, which needs much more research. There is strong variation between academies, as in other schools, though high levels of disadvantage almost invariably affects school performance.

No advantage for lower attaining pupils

The prime argument for the establishment of academies has, from the start, been to raise the attainment of disadvantaged young people. It is surprising, then, that the proportion of disadvantaged pupils in academies who gain five or more A*-C grades or equivalent including English and Maths, i.e. 33% 5ACemEQ, is almost exactly the same as the figure for all maintained schools nationally.

Furthermore, the extensive data supplied by the Department for Education for 2011 provides a breakdown to show what proportion of pupils with various levels of prior (KS2) attainment achieved this level. This is not to suggest that disadvantaged pupils automatically have lower KS2 scores, though many do.

The first table shows what proportion of all pupils were below, at, or above level 4 at KS2. The results show an attainment profile on entry that is lower in academies than other schools, though the difference is not extreme and the profile for academies is not unusual for schools in urban areas.

	Percentage of pupils whose prior attainment was		
	<4	4	>4
Maintained mainstream	17.1	49.4	33.5
Academies	24.8	51.5	23.7

The next table shows what percentage of each of these three groups went on to achieve five or more A*-Cs or equivalent with English and Maths (5ACemEQ) (Department for Education sfr02/2012na, table 6). The results for pupils in academies are virtually identical to those in other schools; academy status makes a difference to only one or two pupils out of every hundred from each prior attainment band.

	Percentage of pupils with low, middle and high prior attainment who achieved 5ACemEQ		
	<4	4	>4
Maintained mainstream	6.9	54.5	95.2
Academies	7.6	52.4	94.3

Time for change

Obviously it takes time to bring about change in a school – though this is something which politicians prefer to forget for non-academy schools. How well do disadvantaged pupils achieve in the academies which have been established longer? For academies open for the whole of KS4, i.e. by September 2009, the average remains much the same: 34% percent of their disadvantaged pupils achieve 5ACemEQ. In academies open for at least five years, the proportion rises to 40 percent, which is somewhat higher than for other schools.

However, for the reasons explained in the previous section on alternative qualifications, we should not take this figure at face value. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils gaining five or more higher grade GCSEs including English and maths (5ACemG) is 21% for academies open by 2010, 24% for those open by 2009, and 30% for those open by 2006. This does suggest that the longer-established academies are, for some reason, more successful than more recent academies in terms of this particular measure. However, we should note that even this well-established group is hardly any more successful than the average for all maintained mainstream schools nationally, which is 28.6%.

We should also remember that these comparisons are with a very poor national average for disadvantaged pupils, which is only half that for other pupils. While we may have reservations over the extent to which schools can compensate for the problems relating to poverty, it is clearly a cause for concern that many disadvantaged young people are not achieving higher.

In summary, only in long-established academies are disadvantaged pupils more likely to achieve five or more A*-C grades *or equivalents* including English and Maths (5ACemEQ). Disadvantaged pupils are less likely to achieve this through GCSEs alone (5ACemG) in academies than in other schools; only in the longest established academies are they slightly more likely to do so than in other schools –

a difference of *only one or two pupils out of every hundred*. If we focus only on those older academies which actually did replace low-attaining schools, we find that, in 18 cases out of 25, disadvantaged pupils in these academies achieve less well at GCSE than in other maintained schools.

Although academies tend to have a larger proportion of disadvantaged pupils than the average for mainstream maintained schools - as indeed do many schools in similar locations - the crucial question is whether disadvantaged pupils do better there than elsewhere. The answer to that question is clearly no.

Variable results

We also need to note the variation in results between academies. This is of course true of other schools, and we would not expect all academies to be equally successful, but strong claims have been made that academy status will in itself benefit disadvantaged young people. The range, in fact, for 5ACemG among disadvantaged pupils runs from 0% to 71%. The following table shows how many of the 44 longest-established academies (i.e. those that opened between 2002-2006) lie in each attainment group:

Academies with different proportions of disadvantaged pupils achieving 5ACemG

Percentage with 5ACemG	0-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+
Number of academies	4	11	9	8	3	7	2

This extreme variation undermines the argument that closing schools and replacing them with academies is the best way to raise attainment for disadvantaged young people.

While it is important to acknowledge that many of the long-established academies replaced high-deprivation, low-achieving schools, nearly half of them do not have this excuse. This is because they are either completely new schools, they are former CTCs with a selective intake, they never were low-achieving schools, or they have dramatically re-engineered their intake to exclude most of their disadvantaged pupils. (See earlier section *Have academies replaced 'underperforming' schools?*) It does not seem right that Government ministers continue to excuse poor opportunities for disadvantaged young people in well-established academies because of the achievement levels of schools they replaced which were closed five to nine years earlier.

Forces of inclusion and exclusion

Further questions remain to be asked, some of which fall beyond the remit of this particular academic study. We should investigate how some academies have managed to re-engineer their pupil populations, in the most extreme cases shedding three quarters of their disadvantaged pupils (see section *Have academies replaced 'failing schools'*). Witnesses to the MPs Committee of Enquiry into

Academies and Trust Schools (12 June 2007, Palace of Westminster) presented evidence of various devices used to deter 'less desirable' pupils who might damage their league table prospects. These included very expensive uniforms (compulsory sports kit costing more than £110). In other cases extremely punitive regimes and arbitrary exclusions have driven out large numbers of pupils (see for example Matthew Taylor, *The Guardian*, 30 May 2006). Fixed-term and permanent exclusions remain twice as high in academies as in other schools (Department of Education, SFR 17/2011; also National Audit Office: *The Academies Programme*, 2010, page 29). We know that exclusion impacts most strongly on disadvantaged pupils.

Some academies continue to serve their original communities, engaging with large numbers of disadvantaged students and their families. Some academies are exceptionally good in terms of how well they educate disadvantaged pupils, and some even have a higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils than in previous years. *But these are the exceptions, as with other schools. These unusual cases should be studied for the lessons we might learn, along with highly successful non-academy schools, but so far nobody has been able to provide evidence to establish a link with academy status.*