

## Does academy status prevent schools falling below floor targets?

- *One out of seven academies fall below the 'floor target', the indicator used by the Government to signify that a school has a serious attainment problem. This is no better for academies which have been open for longer. The comparative figure for all maintained schools nationally is 1 in 34.*
- *But for their greater use of alternative qualifications, more than one in three academies would be below the 'floor'.*

In recent years the notion of 'floor target' has been applied to identify 'underperforming' schools. It is a crude and unjust measure, as no consideration is given to the characteristics of the student population. Not surprisingly far more schools serving areas of poverty fall below the floor target. For secondary schools, the current 'floor' is 35% of pupils achieving five or more A\*-C grades 'or equivalent', including English and Maths. Again, this is crude, and takes no account of the overuse of 'equivalents'. However, since this method has been officially imposed, we will pay some attention to it.

Of academies opened by September 2010, 1 in 7 are below the 'floor'. The proportion is the same for those academies opened by September 2009, i.e. for the whole of Key Stage 4. The problem becomes more severe (around 1 in 6) if we exclude selective schools, those with low numbers of disadvantaged pupils and so on.

By comparison with 1 in 7 academies, only 1 in 34 maintained secondary schools fall below the floor; in other words, academies are five times more likely to be below the floor than other schools. In non-academy schools, below-floor attainment levels are usually a signal of imminent closure and replacement by an academy.

It can rightly be argued that it takes some time to 'turn round' an underachieving school, so we should expect this problem to be restricted to newly founded academies. However we find that the proportion does not diminish with age. The following table shows that around one in seven academies are below the floor:

Academies open	Number below 'floor' (2011 results)
2 or more years	1 in 7
3 or more years	1 in 7
4 or more years	1 in 9
5 or more years	1 in 7

If we look at this from the other direction, we find that academy status has made little impact on low attainment except by heavy use of the alternative qualifications. For this exercise we identified academies whose predecessor schools had attainment in their penultimate year below the current floor of 35%. (Figures were, of course, adjusted to control for the annual attainment rise of all schools

nationally. We used the penultimate rather than the final year to avoid the possibility of a dip due to demoralisation associated with closure.)

In a quarter of these cases the academy remains below 'floor'. In a half attainment has risen due to reliance on 'equivalents'. In only a quarter does there appear to be a genuine improvement in attainment. Meanwhile, in some other cases, schools have fallen below the floor since becoming academies whereas the predecessor schools were not below the floor.

Many of the academies with very low attainment have been 'bouncing along the bottom' for years. We might ask whether they should be closed down as academies and re-opened as local authority comprehensive schools. This is not, we reiterate, meant to endorse the notion of 'floor target', which is a crude measure and punitively applied (see TN6), but schools which are not academies are surely entitled to a level playing field.

#### *Low achievement disguised by 'equivalents'*

We also raised the question of how many academies come above the floor because of their heavy use of 'equivalents'. The gap between 5 or more A\*-Cs including English and Maths with and without equivalents (5ACemEQ and 5ACemG) is on average 6 percentage points for all maintained schools, but twice that rate for academies. What happens if we allow academies a margin of 6 percentage points? This would suggest a GCSE-only 'floor' of 29 percent.

Department for Education data shows that 1 in 34 maintained schools are below the 'floor'. As stated above, of academies open by September 2009 (all of KS4), about 1 in 7 are below the 'floor' for 5ACemEQ. For our imaginary GCSE-only 'floor', it is just over 1 in 3. If we exclude more advantaged academies (as explained earlier), it is around half. .

#### *Taking context into account*

We reiterate once more that we give little credence to such crude measures, which pay no heed to context. The teachers in some schools, whether academies or not, face extremely challenging situations, with young people's aspirations seriously undermined by chronic unemployment in the area and the social damage resulting from intense poverty.

We have tried various methods during the course of this investigation to match outcomes more realistically against pupil characteristics (see TN7). Our intention was to experiment with ways of comparing GCSE results with expectations based on prior KS2 levels and also the extent of disadvantage in each school. No formula proved entirely satisfactory in the end – selective schools, and often comprehensive schools with very few disadvantaged pupils, generally enjoy the most favourable conditions for 'adding value'. However one thing this exercise did establish was the very wide range of 'effectiveness', as judged by these various formulae, among academies – on the most reliable formula, the difference between actual and expected results ranged from +45 to -30. Once again, we conclude against an 'academies effect'.