

## **Are academies more likely to improve GCSE results than other schools?**

- *Academies are not improving faster than similar schools.*
- *It is difficult to compare like with like, because so many academies have changed their intake and now have a less disadvantaged population than previously.*
- *The use of equivalent qualifications (what the Education Secretary describes as 'gaming') also distorts the figures, creating an illusion of more substantial improvement.*
- *A critical scrutiny of the data suggests that only two in five academies have genuinely improved their GCSE results more than other schools. In half of these the improvement had already begun before academy conversion, in the predecessor school. Meanwhile, the performance of one in five academies has declined by comparison with other schools.*

The claim that academies are improving GCSE results faster than other schools does not stand up to critical scrutiny. This claim, familiar since the earliest official evaluations, has been reiterated by Coalition government ministers. In the autumn of 2011 the Department for Education claimed that academy GCSE results were improving at twice the rate of other schools.

Firstly, this was based on provisional results for 2011 which turned out to be a serious underestimate for non-academies.

Secondly, the calculation involved improvement over only a single year – generally an unreliable basis.

Thirdly, among non-academies and academies alike, those which started off low tended to show more improvement than schools which were already attaining high. For example, academies with 0-30% 5ACem in 2010 gained 8.6 percentage points in 2011, as opposed to 8.8 percentage points for the parallel group of non-academies.

Academies appear to be improving more but only because a large number of them began low. Not all academies did but the proportions are certainly different. For example, 15% of academies (or, for newly established ones, their predecessor schools) had 0-30% of pupils with 5ACem in 2010, but only 3% of non-academies.

In order to provide a fair comparison, it was necessary to create a matching set of non-academies, based on their 2010 attainment, to reflect the fact that more academies had started off low (TN8). The improvement of this matching set of non-academies was 4.25 percentage points compared with 4.5 for academies. This slight difference is more than accounted for by the academies' overuse of 'equivalents'.

It also became apparent that schools with a higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils tended to be improving more. Again, the distribution of academies is different from non-academies. Using the same method, it turned out that academies improved 4.5 percentage points in 2011 compared with 2010, but the matching set of non-academies improved 3.4 percentage points. This is a much smaller

difference than in the official claims, and also easily accounted for by academies' exploitation of 'equivalents'.

Looking at improvement over three years rather than one year, i.e. from 2008 to 2011, academies have improved 15 percentage points compared with 14 percentage points for a matching set of non-academies. This is far from ministerial claims of 'twice as fast'.

### *Contributing factors*

The claim that academies are improving faster than other schools has been made repeatedly since the early PriceWaterhouseCooper evaluations. It is important to look beneath the surface of such assertions.

As stated earlier, none of the early official evaluations (PWC 2004-2008) took account of the GNVQ = 4 A\*-Cs 'equivalence' problem. Though they commented on a reduction in free school meal (FSM) statistics, they did not attempt to account for this either when evaluating attainment. A further factor was academies' attraction of additional pupils, particularly those without FSM entitlement, in other words with no particular indicator of disadvantage. These could not be evaluated by a simple comparison with the predecessor school. Once this was taken into account, the claim that academies were improving faster than other maintained schools disintegrated (Wrigley 2011).

Earlier in this report reference was made to ways in which some academies have re-engineered their student populations. Several extreme cases were highlighted where academies had managed to lose three-quarters of their disadvantaged students. Many cases are difficult to spot. However, a close scrutiny of the earliest academies shows a significant shift in population. The 2011 data of the first 19 academies were compared with their predecessor schools in 2002. In three cases the proportion of disadvantaged pupils went up, in three it stayed the same, and in 13 it went down. In 9 out of 19, there was a 10 or more percentage point drop in FSM-entitled students.

Within the highly competitive 'quasi-markets' of many towns and cities – an environment where league tables and Ofsted reports positively encourage parental 'choosiness' – a school's position in the local pecking order makes an enormous difference. A high position can attract parents, particularly those who can afford to move house or transport their children to school. A weak position can leave places empty, to be filled later with pupils excluded from other schools. The market position of many academies has been considerably enhanced through impressive - though not always functional - new buildings, as well as copious political praise and media attention.

### *Improvement – real or apparent?*

In addition to looking at average improvement, it is also revealing to look on an individual basis at schools which are improving more than other schools and those which are not.

Because the average results of all schools in England rise year by year, it is necessary to adjust the pre-2011 scores to allow for this and to make visible which academies have improved more than other schools. (This is rather like saying that a shop assistant who earned £5 a week in 1948 is paid £200 a week ‘in today’s prices’. See TN2)

Various rules were established (see TN9) to systematically distinguish academies with falling results, no clear trend and rising results. Because of the possible distorting effect of extensive ‘gaming’, four groups were distinguished:

- 1) declining results
- 2) no clear trend (i.e. less than 2 percentage points either way)
- 3) rising results without extensive use of ‘equivalents’
- 4) rising results but more than 10 percentage points between 5ACemEQ and 5ACemG.

The distinction between 3 and 4 was necessary because large EQ / G gaps can artificially inflate results. Because we did not have GCSE-only data for earlier years, it was impossible to say precisely how much the apparent improvement was a result of reliance on ‘equivalents’. However, by examining whether the improvement was outweighed by how much each academy used equivalents beyond the national norm for maintained schools, we were able to make the following analysis.

*Academies opened Sept 2009 or earlier*

Downward trend	22%
No trend	14%
Upward trend	37%
Apparent upward trend but outweighed by ‘equivalents’	27%

There is a somewhat different pattern for the longest-established group of academies:

*Academies opened Sept 2006 or earlier*

Downward trend	18%
No trend	20%
Upward trend	45%
Apparent upward trend but outweighed by ‘equivalents’	16%

The picture is much more varied than suggested by simple assertions that attainment in academies has risen faster than other schools. The data initially looks as if about three academies in five are improving more than other schools. However, after we remove those whose gain is outweighed by their heavy use of ‘equivalents’, we are left with approximately two out of five academies that have

genuinely improved. Meanwhile, one academy in five actually shows a downward trend relative to other schools.

Furthermore, in half of the cases of 'upward trend' as defined above, the academy's predecessor school was already on an upward trajectory. This means that only 1 in 5 academies can genuinely claim to have initiated an improvement.

Once more, this data raises questions about the assumed 'academies effect'. Whatever factors are leading to improvement - and often they are heavily contextualised, involving a complex interaction of circumstances, people, school culture, leadership, teaching methods, relationships with students and parents, and many other factors - they cannot be related to academy status in any straightforward way.

This is underlined by the fact that a third of those marked above as 'Upward Trend' took over from schools which were *already improving before they became academies*.