

Have academies replaced ‘underperforming’ schools?

- *It is a myth that most academies have replaced ‘underperforming’ schools in disadvantaged areas. In addition, since becoming academies many have changed their pupil intake.*

It is often claimed that academies have replaced schools which had low levels of attainment and which were serving seriously disadvantaged populations. This is a half truth.

The early academies, opened from 2002 to 2004, were certainly more likely to fit this description. The first three (2002) had between 40 and 50 percent of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM). The average for academies opened from 2002-6 was 37%. Most, though not all, of the predecessor schools had low GCSE attainment figures.

However a number of these early academies have reduced their FSM-entitled students by over 10 percentage points. Account should also be taken of changes in local status (the pecking order of parental choice) which are not visible in the statistics but affects pupil intake.

The 44 academies which had opened by September 2006 now have an average of 33% of pupils entitled to free school meals. This is more than double the national average, though no worse than the average for major conurbations such as Manchester, Birmingham and inner London.

However, five are former City Technology Colleges with intakes heavily skewed towards pupils with high prior attainment at KS2. A further seven were already achieving well, and some other predecessor schools could not in any sense be described as ‘failing’ (see technical notes TN1 and 2). At least three dramatically re-engineered their pupil intake; in one the proportion of pupils with FSM entitlement dropped from 51% to 13% and in another from 60% to 16%. A further three are new foundations, not replacing existing schools; although located in poor areas, their intakes are little different from national norms of KS2 attainment. Just over half can be seen as a continuation of seriously disadvantaged schools in terms of pupil profile or attainment.

Of all the academies open by September 2010 and with KS4 results in 2011, only half can claim to replace ‘failing schools’, based on predecessor school’s results a year before closure, the criterion of the current ‘floor target’ (TN6) and adjusting results to match annual improvements in other schools (TN2). In terms of pupil composition, around a third clearly do not fit the stereotype, whether because of a high-ability intake (including former grammar schools and CTCs), few pupils with FSM entitlement, or both (e.g. successful comprehensives in affluent areas, with high ability intakes). Their average FSM entitlement is 25%, well above the national average (15%) but not unusual for urban areas.

The recent voluntary conversion to academies of large numbers of high-achieving schools, as a result of Coalition Government policies, does not affect the present report, as this occurred after the cut-off date of mid-September 2010 (TN1).