

Executive summary

This research examines in detail the various claims made by Government of the benefits of academy schools. It seeks to determine whether there is indeed an ‘academies effect’ in terms of improving school performance.

It has been claimed that:

- academy status ‘turns round’ underperforming schools serving deprived communities;
- disadvantaged young people make better progress in academies;
- once well established, academies provide improved GCSE success across a broad curriculum; and
- major academy chain sponsors are particularly effective.

This research questions these assertions. It examines the details of individual school GCSE performance as well as the averages, and digs below the surface of headline figures.

In particular, it questions the widespread myth that academies are predominantly replacements for ‘failing schools’. It also questions the failure of official evaluations to examine academies’ heavy use of alternative qualifications which are supposedly ‘equivalent’ to GCSE A*-C grades. Despite the current Secretary of State’s condemnation of such over-reliance as ‘gaming’, official evaluations continue to sidestep this issue, which results in a lack of rigour when academies are compared to other schools.

The main findings reveal that:

- 1) The headline attainment statistics for academies depend very heavily on *alternative qualifications* to GCSE. Without these ‘equivalents’, students in academies are just *two-thirds as likely to achieve five or more A*-C grades* including English and Maths as young people studying in non-academy schools.

Academies rely on ‘equivalents’ to GCSE twice as heavily as other schools to boost their attainment scores. Government ministers call this practice ‘gaming’. Although some other schools use this strategy too when faced with the pressure of league tables and Ofsted inspections, academies exploit it most.

The use of equivalents inflates attainment figures for academies overall, and in a fifth of academies by over 20 percentage points. There is a clear contradiction in Government policy in that the supposed success of academies is based on qualifications that ministers distrust and are in the process of abolishing.

- 2) *Disadvantaged pupils do no better* in academies than in other schools. Without the ‘equivalent’ qualifications, they do significantly worse.
- 3) Academies are *not improving faster than non-academies with similar characteristics*. Schools which have a lower starting point, and also those which have a higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils, tend to have above average improvement. This is true of academies and non-academies alike. The illusion of academies improving faster is simply due to the higher proportion of academies with a low starting point, and the higher proportion of academies with large numbers of disadvantaged pupils.

The apparent year-on-year improvement of many academies also depends critically on their exploitation of alternative qualifications. Compared with other schools, 3 out of 5 academies show either a deteriorating performance, no change, or an apparent ‘improvement’ resulting from the heavy use of ‘equivalents’.

Even among the minority of academies which have improved on the basis of *GCSE results*, we have to bear in mind that some of them took over from schools which were already showing an upward trend before they became academies. We also know that some academies have found ways of deterring or excluding less ‘promising’ pupils, and in other cases the new buildings will have served to attract more ambitious and mobile families, thus boosting results.

- 4) It is disturbing that *1 out of 7 academies fall below the ‘floor target’*, the indicator used by the Government to signify that a school has a serious problem in terms of academic attainment. This is no better for academies which have been open for longer. The comparative figure for all maintained schools is 1 out of 34. Furthermore, but for the heavy use of equivalents, around *1 in 3* academies would fall through the ‘floor’.

Many of these academies have shown very low levels of attainment for some years. This has gone unchallenged, at the same time as higher achieving schools have been closed down for replacement by academies.

- 5) It is a *myth* that most academies established before the change of Government *replaced low-achieving schools with disadvantaged populations*. In fact, around a third clearly do not fit that stereotype in terms of pupil composition, and about a half in terms of the attainment levels in the predecessor schools a year before closure. Furthermore, some have subsequently re-engineered their student populations to reduce the number of disadvantaged pupils, or attracted significant numbers of new pupils who did not attend the predecessor schools.

- 6) The Government has decreed that schools should encourage pupils to study a combination of GCSE subjects which they have named the ‘English Baccalaureate’ (EBacc). These subjects are English, Maths, two sciences, a humanities subject (History or Geography) and a foreign language. On average, academy pupils are only *half as likely to achieve the EBacc subjects* as in non-academy schools. In a quarter of academies *not a single pupil* attained the EBacc combination.
- 7) This report also examines the argument that the ‘academy effect’ takes some time to achieve. By examining academies which have been open for five years or more, we conclude that this has *little impact on academies’ ability to raise academic attainment*. It is important to acknowledge that improvement does take time, but unfortunately this time is rarely granted to non-academy schools.

Problems within these long-established but low-achieving academies continue to be attributed by politicians to low achievement in the predecessor schools. This explanation is unconvincing since the predecessor schools have been closed for five years and more. The academies which replaced them have had many advantages, including new buildings and extensive support. To all intents and purposes these academies are new schools which should now be evaluated according to their current poor performance.

- 8) Given the recent emphasis in Government policy on major sponsors running chains of academies, the report examines these developing chains based on their most recent examination results. It concludes that there is *little consistency in achievement, equity or curriculum*, so that it is difficult to identify any improvement which might be due to the involvement of the major sponsor.

The attainment of disadvantaged pupils is of concern in half 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 is 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.* This has not stopped the Government handing these chains control of large numbers of additional schools.

Overall, this research provides detailed evidence to reinforce findings contained in the recent National Audit Office report (2010) that there is *no academy effect* but *considerable variability*, and that *disadvantaged young people generally do no better in academies than in other schools*.