

in brief...

# Faith primary schools: better schools or better pupils?

Average levels of pupil achievement in religiously affiliated primary schools seem to be higher than in the secular sector. Research by **Stephen Gibbons** and **Olmo Silva** examines whether faith schools really are better or if their pupils are just different.

Government policy in many countries now favours policies based on incentives, governance, increased choice and competition. In England, this idea has come to be linked to the expansion of the faith school sector because it symbolises choice and diversity in the education system, it embodies the kind of practice in admissions and governance that policy-makers wish to promote, and – crucially – it offers, so many people claim, higher educational standards.

Arguments for expansion of the faith sector are usually supported by evidence of higher average levels of achievement in religiously affiliated schools compared with the secular sector. But the fact that we observe higher attainment in the faith sector has little bearing on the advantages offered by moving a 'typical' secular school pupil into the faith sector. This is because pupils currently attending faith schools are not 'typical'.

Pupils studying at religiously affiliated schools differ from pupils in secular schools along several dimensions, many of which – such as family background – are correlated with their academic achievement. These differences arise in part because the parents and pupils who choose faith schools may have different preferences and attitudes towards education; and in part because faith schools may have operated some forms of 'covert' selection in their admissions procedures.

Religious  
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teaching core  
subjects



In our research, we investigate whether faith schools really raise pupil attainments more than other schools, or whether they simply enrol pupils with characteristics conducive to faster educational progress. We also try to understand whether any beneficial impact of attending a faith school comes from its religious affiliation or from specific governance arrangements.

To answer these questions, we consider pupils at the end of their primary schooling in England, when they have reached the age of 11. We make use of a large census that includes information on pupils' past and current achievements, school type and characteristics, place of residence (postcode) and schools attended.

Using this information, we compare the test results of 11 year old pupils who attend faith primary schools with those of pupils in secular primary schools with similar abilities (as measured by their achievement at the age of 7) and who seem to have similar preferences and family background – in particular because they live in the same street or block of housing and because they go on to attend the same secondary school.

In addition, we compare the attainments at the age of 11 for secular and faith primary school pupils who exhibit similar levels of commitment to religious schooling through their choice of secondary school.

The highlights of our research results are that:

- Faith primary schools only offer a very small advantage over secular schools in terms of test scores at the age of 11 in mathematics and English. Moving a 'typical' secular school pupil into the faith sector would push him or her up the test-based pupil rankings by less than one percentile.
- Any benefit of attending a faith primary school is linked to the more autonomous governance arrangements that characterise 'voluntary aided' schools (such as control over admissions procedures). Pupils in religiously affiliated schools that broadly fall under the control of the local education authority – that is, 'voluntary controlled' schools – do not progress faster than pupils in secular primary schools.
- All of the apparent advantage of faith school education

can be explained by unobserved differences between pupils who apply and are admitted to faith schools and those who do not. Pupils who do not attend a faith primary school up to age 11 but attend a faith secondary school thereafter perform just as well at age 11 as those who attended a faith primary school but then attend a secular secondary school.

On the basis of this evidence, it seems clear that whether or not a primary school is religiously affiliated has little bearing on its effectiveness in educating children in core curriculum subjects.

## Any benefit of attending a faith primary school is linked to their more autonomous governance arrangements

This article summarises 'Faith Primary Schools: Better Schools or Better Pupils' by Stephen Gibbons and Olmo Silva, Discussion Paper No. 72 from the Centre for the Economics of Education (CEE) at CEP (<http://cee.lse.ac.uk/cee%20dps/ceedp72.pdf>).

**Stephen Gibbons** and **Olmo Silva** are both CEE researchers and active members of CEP's wider research programme on education and skills.