

Since a majority of secondary schools in England are now academies, any further 'academisation' will be concentrated in the primary sector. So the time is ripe for this first comprehensive evaluation of primary academies' effectiveness at raising pupils' achievement, provided by **Andrew Eyles**, **Stephen Machin** and **Sandra McNally**.

# Primary academies in England



PRIMARY SCHOOL PRIMARY SCHOOL PRIMARY SCHOOL PRIMARY SCHOOL PRIMARY SCHOOL

PRIMARY ACADEMY PRIMARY ACADEMY PRIMARY ACADEMY

Academy schools were first introduced in the early 2000s, largely as a remedial improvement programme for badly performing secondary schools in England. The idea was that private sector ‘sponsors’ would take control of struggling state schools and be given the freedom to innovate. While other state schools are managed by local educational authorities to differing extents, academies enjoy significant autonomy.

Although they are state-funded, academies receive their funding directly from central government with no restrictions on how they spend the money. Furthermore, the sponsor or trust that appoints the governing body and is the *de facto* owner of the school may contribute substantial capital costs in excess of this. With regard to staffing decisions, academies are not required to follow national pay scales and while they are required to use performance management, they are exempt from the regulations governing performance management in state-funded schools.

The initial programme was relatively small-scale; 244 secondary schools had gained academy status before the change of government following the May 2010 general election. CEP research suggests that these early sponsored academies had

a positive impact on both short- and medium-term pupil outcomes (Eyles and Machin, 2015; Eyles et al, 2016a; 2016b).

The election of the coalition government in 2010 and the Academies Act 2010 heralded the start of an ambitious and all-encompassing expansion of the academies programme. Not only were ‘outstanding’ schools given the chance to convert without the requirement of signing up a sponsor, but primary schools were also encouraged to gain academy status. The expanded scope of the programme has led the number of academies in England to skyrocket: 60% of secondary schools and 15% of primary schools now have academy status.

We cannot extrapolate findings from previous research on the original academies programme because the post-2010 expansion was much larger in scale and it made conversion of

outstanding schools the priority (rather than schools in disadvantaged areas). We document the very different profile of post-2010 academies in Eyles et al (2015). Furthermore, no primary schools became academies prior to 2010.

Our latest research focuses on primary schools that did not have a sponsor and which went down the converter route (that is, the majority). Like their secondary school counterparts, these schools tend to be high achieving prior to conversion. In fact, over half of the 270 schools we study were graded outstanding or good in inspections by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education) before converting.

The non-random selection of the schools into academy status poses problems when trying to make causal claims about the impact of attending a primary academy. We get around this in two ways.

First, we compare outcomes for those attending primary academies that converted in the 2010/11 and 2011/12 school years with those attending schools that converted in the 2014/15 and 2015/16 school years. The latter schools look very similar in terms of pre-conversion characteristics, which means that their pupils should provide a credible control group for those who actually do attend academies in the sample period.

## Attendance at a primary academy leads to no discernible improvement in pupils’ test scores



PRIMARY ACADEMY PRIMARY ACADEMY

PRIMARY SCHOOL PRIMARY SCHOOL PRIMARY SCHOOL PRIMARY SCHOOL PRIMARY SCHOOL

Second, because pupils choosing to attend academies may be different from those who choose not to, we limit our study to pupils who enrolled in schools before they became academies, but by virtue of their age at the time of enrolment, spent a significant part of their primary education in a converter academy.

Looking at scores in English and mathematics at key stage 2, we find that schools that converted in 2010/11 and 2011/12 display similar trends in test scores prior to conversion as schools that converted in 2014/15 and 2015/16. But there is no change in these relative trends once the schools gain academy status. These results suggest that attendance at a primary academy led to no discernible improvement, or decline, in test scores (see Figure 1).

A potential explanation for our findings is that nothing actually happens once schools gain academy status. But this explanation is not borne out by the data. In a recent survey by the Department for Education (Cirin, 2014), primary schools stated that they made use of their newly granted freedoms once they converted.

In particular, more than half of the surveyed schools said that they changed their patterns of capital expenditure and introduced savings in back-office functions after conversion. Similarly, just under half chose to diverge from the national curriculum and altered the performance management system of their teachers.

In addition to the survey, schools gain extra income on conversion to spend on services previously provided by the local educational authority. But little of the money appears to be spent on traditional inputs into education production, such as teachers and learning resources.

Our results cast doubt both on the suitability of academisation for primary schools and on whether further expansion of the academies programme will be beneficial to education in England. Given that the majority of secondary schools now have academy status, further expansion is a more pertinent issue in the primary sector. The process of restructuring schools in England in this way seems overly costly if there are no gains for pupils.

## Primary academies have been less effective than the disadvantaged secondary schools that thrived in the first wave of academies

**Andrew Eyles** is a research assistant in CEP's education and skills programme.

**Stephen Machin** is director of CEP.

**Sandra McNally** is professor of economics at the University of Surrey and director of CEP's education and skills programme.

### Further reading

Rob Cirin (2014) 'Do Academies Make Use of Their Autonomy?', Department for Education research report.

Andrew Eyles, Claudia Hupkau and Stephen Machin (2016a) 'Academies, Charters and Free Schools: Do New School Types Deliver Better Outcomes?', *Economic Policy* 31(87): 453-501.

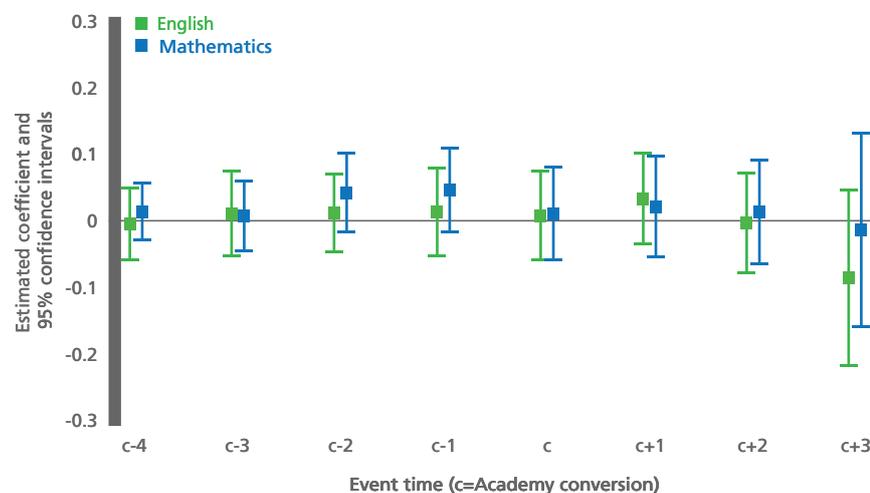
Andrew Eyles, Claudia Hupkau and Stephen Machin (2016b) 'School Reforms and Pupil Performance', *Labour Economics* 41: 9-19.

Andrew Eyles and Stephen Machin (2015) 'The Introduction of Academy Schools to England's Education', CEP Discussion Paper No. 1368 (<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1368.pdf>).

Andrew Eyles, Stephen Machin and Sandra McNally (2016) 'Unexpected School Reform: Academisation of Primary Schools in England', CEP Discussion Paper No. 1445 (<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1445.pdf>).

Andrew Eyles, Stephen Machin and Olmo Silva (2015) 'Academies 2: The New Batch', CEP Discussion Paper No. 1370 (<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1370.pdf>).

Figure 1: Key stage 2 test scores before and after academy conversion



Source: Eyles et al (2016).