

in brief...

Pupil exclusion in academy schools

Schools in England that became academies before 2010 typically began to exclude significant numbers of their more disruptive pupils. Research by **Stephen Machin** and **Matteo Sandi** suggests that this was the result of the strict disciplinary approach that the schools adopted rather than a strategic effort to improve their educational results.

Does the strategic exclusion of poorly performing pupils explain the improvements in overall performance recorded by academy schools in England? Our analysis of the initial wave of academies – those that opened before 2010 as part of a school improvement programme – shows that exclusion was not a means of improving aggregate results for academies in the published league tables.

Pre-2010 academy schools did indeed experience sharp pupil performance gains after conversion, but not because of strategic pupil exclusion. Rather, exclusion seems to be a feature of the strict disciplinary behaviour procedures that some of these schools operate – an integral part of a ‘No Excuses’ culture.

This finding is corroborated by the fact that we find much smaller gaps in permanent exclusion among the second batch of conversions to academies – those opened after 2010, which were not disadvantaged schools coping with the behaviour problems that faced the earlier batch of academies.

Inclusion in a school league table results hinges on the January census of pupils in Year 11, the final year of compulsory education in England. We study whether following conversion, academies started to exclude permanently more pupils before the January census in Year 11.

Following academy conversion, the likelihood of pupils enrolled in academies being permanently excluded in Year 11 before the January census increased by 0.083 percentage points. This increase is much bigger between the pre-2010 academies, where conversion led to a 0.282 percentage points increase in the likelihood that an enrolled pupil was excluded in Year 11 before the January census. In post-2010 academies, the likelihood that an enrolled pupil was strategically excluded increased by a more modest 0.052 percentage points.

We also study whether these higher rates of pupil exclusion can plausibly explain the steep pupil performance gains observed in pre-2010 academies. Our simulation exercise suggests that for the performance improvement of

pre-2010 academies to disappear, each excluded pupil would have needed to exert an implausibly large negative influence on the GCSE results of all other Year 11 pupils in the same school and school year.

Moreover, we find no evidence that pupils excluded from academies were worse performers than pupils excluded from ‘control’ schools (otherwise similar schools that did not have academy status). Pre-2010 academies also permanently excluded more pupils in Year 11 who were still allowed to take their GCSE exams in the school that excluded them, which removes scope for strategic manipulation of GCSE results.

Finally, we find no association between performance gains and changes in permanent exclusion following conversion. The schools that experienced the greatest performance gains are not in fact the same schools that experienced the largest increases in exclusion rates following conversion.

The overall conclusion is that rather than being used as a strategic means to boost measured school performance, the higher rate of exclusion seems to have been part of the tough discipline procedures that the pre-2010 academies adopted.

This article summarises ‘Autonomous Schools and Strategic Pupil Exclusion’ by Stephen Machin and Matteo Sandi, published in the *Economic Journal* in January 2020 (earlier version available as CEP Discussion Paper No. 1527: <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1527.pdf>).

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