SCHOOLS: the evidence on which policies can really improve pupil performance
New #ElectionEconomics policy briefing from the Centre for Economic Performance

There has been a radical and as yet unproven shake-up of the UK’s schools system under the coalition government’s programme of ‘mass academisation’ – yet so far, the proliferation of academy schools has been surprisingly little discussed in the run-up to the general election.

A new report from the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) – the latest in a series of background briefings on key policy issues in the May 2015 UK general election – explores the evidence on the key drivers of improved pupil performance, including academy schools, educational spending, teaching and the curriculum.

Among the findings:

- The UK continues to perform at about the OECD average in international rankings of pupil achievement with an unchanged performance over the last 10 years.

- Under the coalition government, half of secondary schools have become academies: schools that are more autonomous and funded directly by central government rather than through local authorities. Research evidence suggests that under Labour, there was a large improvement in the first 100 or so schools to become ‘city academies’ within four years of their conversion.

- Generalising from these early academies is difficult because the schools that have converted since 2010 have very different characteristics. For example, the early academies were set up in disadvantaged areas whereas the current 4,403 academies have relatively advantaged pupils in schools formerly rated as ‘outstanding’.

- The schools budget has remained stable as a proportion of GDP since 2010 (6% in 2011), even though the average class size in primary schools is high by OECD standards (25 versus 21). Research evidence indicates that school spending matters for pupil achievement, especially for disadvantaged pupils.

- The Conservatives and Labour have made explicit commitments on school expenditure over the next Parliament: the Conservatives to protect the schools’ budget in cash terms; Labour to protect it in real terms. But neither has made an explicit commitment to protect expenditure in either the early years or post-16.

- There is broad agreement that high quality teaching matters hugely for pupil achievement, but the parties differ on where they place emphasis on the curriculum. The Conservatives emphasise basic skills in literacy and numeracy at primary school, whereas Labour’s emphasis is on a broader curriculum in secondary school and the post-16 agenda.
• David Cameron has promised an expansion of free schools – schools similar to academies except that they are new entrants rather than converters. One of the concerns about this policy is whether or not it will be implemented with a view to meeting the projected demand for places in different areas of the country arising from demographic changes.

Professor Sandra McNally, the report’s author, comments:

‘We could do with more debate during the election campaign on the desirability or otherwise of the academies programme.

‘The question is especially pressing for primary schools, which are much smaller and more numerous than secondary schools – and only 10% of which currently have academy status. It would be valuable for voters to know what the different parties plan to do with them and why.

‘The parties also need to be quizzed about whether their commitment to protecting the schools budget extends to the early years and post-16 education. Both phases are very important – and young people now have to be in some form of education up to the age of 18.’

ENDS

Notes for editors:

‘Schools: the evidence on academies, resources and pupil performance’ by Sandra McNally is the latest in CEP’s #ElectionEconomics series.

Objective, brief and non-technical, CEP Election Analysis is a series of background briefings on the policy issues in the May 2015 UK General Election

This series discusses the research evidence on some of the UK’s key policy battlegrounds, including immigration, austerity, living standards, productivity, business, Europe, health, education, crime, inequality, gender, urban and regional policy, housing and planning, climate change and energy.

These analyses are provided by some of our expert researchers and draw on some of our past and current research.

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