Evidence for Excellence in Education

NFER Thinks

What the evidence tells us

Academies: It's time to learn the lessons



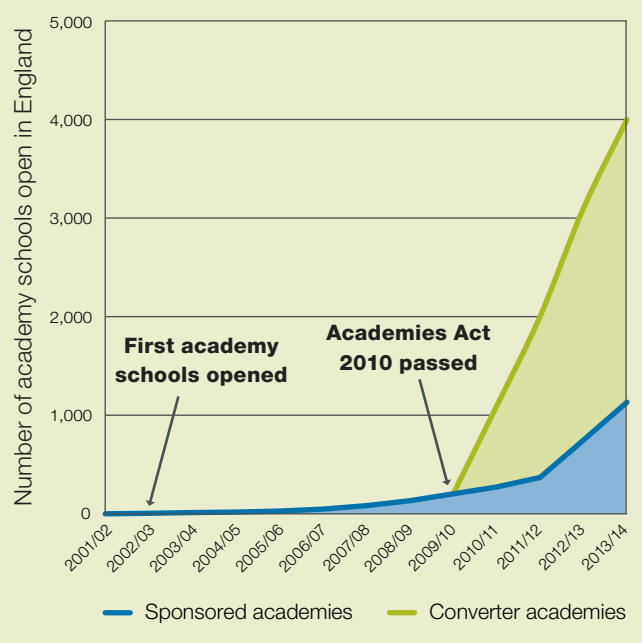
Academies are now an established part of the English school landscape. Future policy should focus on learning the lessons from the growth of academy schools.

In this *NFER Thinks*, we present the case that any future expansion in the number of academies should be motivated by a clear vision of the long-term outcomes for learners that academisation is aiming to achieve. We also argue that evaluation should be embedded in the process.

Policy context

Academy schools have been part of the school landscape in England for more than a decade. The first three schools opened in September 2002, and by February 2015 there were 4,461 academies in England. Growth in the number of academies accelerated from 2010, especially as they began to include higher-performing schools as well as those needing improvement, and primary schools as well as secondaries. Academies now comprise 60 per cent of secondary schools and 13 per cent of primaries.

Growth in academies 2001–2014



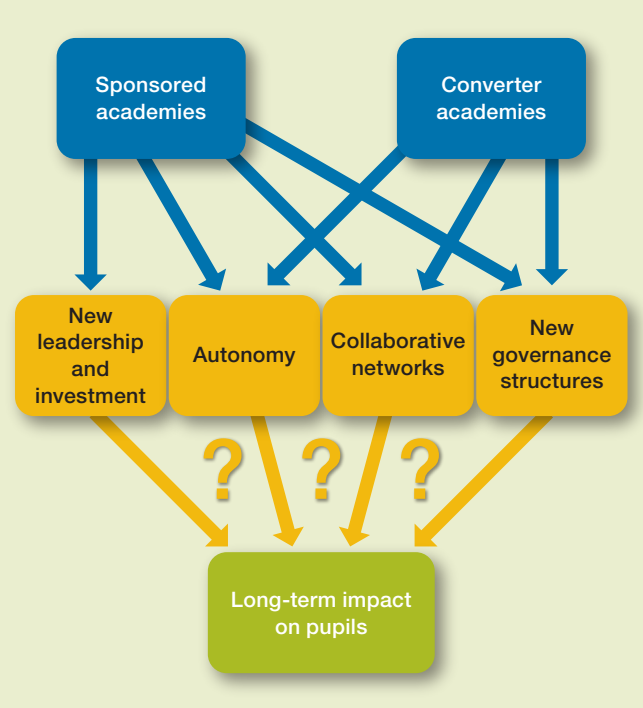
Source: Department for Education, 2015

The early academies programme created schools that were very different from those they replaced. The new freedoms given to these schools were supposed to drive higher attainment. However, maintained schools now have many of the same freedoms associated with academy status to change the way they operate. For example, the freedom to relate the pay of teachers and senior leaders to performance has been extended to all schools. Both maintained and academy schools have opportunities to collaborate with other schools. So if all schools have similar freedoms and opportunities to collaborate – and these really are driving improvements – does England need more academies?

The Education Select Committee recently urged the Department for Education (DfE) to "review the lessons of the wholesale conversion of the secondary sector to inform any future expansion" (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education Select Committee, 2014). We agree: now is the time to reflect on what academy schools have achieved; the lessons learned about how and why goals were or were not achieved; and to understand the implications for any further expansion of academies. Academies are different types of school, and they became academies for different reasons and with a multifaceted set of intended objectives. By examining what we do and do not know about the various mechanisms through which academy schools might have had an impact on education in England, we can draw out the lessons to develop future policy.

As the diagram below illustrates, there is a plethora of mechanisms and related questions: was new leadership and investment, unique to the early sponsored academies programme, the driver of change, or did autonomy also play a part? What impact are new governance structures having on groups of schools, and how is that structure interacting with schools' opportunities to support, or be supported by, other schools?

The mechanisms for change in academies policy



We argue that any future government policy on school structures should have a clearly articulated "theory of change",[1] which would:

- **Set strategic goals** – outline the long-term objectives that the policy is intended to achieve, with the vision commonly understood by stakeholders. We believe every objective should be explicitly linked to improvements in the lives of learners.
- **Identify the mechanisms** – set out the short- and intermediate-term goals intended to achieve the outcomes and the connections between them that will bring change about.
- **Plan for failure** – consider what constitutes unacceptable progress towards the goals and plan for intervention in those cases.

A **sponsored academy** is a formerly maintained school that became an academy as part of a government intervention strategy, and is run by a government-approved sponsor.

A **converter academy** is a formerly maintained school that has voluntarily converted to academy status and does not necessarily have a sponsor.

1 "A theory of change ... describes the change you want to make and the steps involved in making that change happen." (Kail and Lumley, 2012)

What have we learned from academies?

New leadership and investment

The first academies opened in 2002–09 and replaced consistently underperforming schools with new leadership and new investment. This 'shock treatment' was designed to put underperforming schools on the path to sustained improvement. Accountability to the secretary of state rather than the local authority came with freedom to change the school's policy on staffing structure, alter the school day and develop new curriculum and pedagogical models.

There is good quality evidence that these early sponsored academies had a positive impact on pupil performance. Machin and Vernoit (2011) found that pupil performance in academies significantly improved after changing their status, compared to a group of maintained schools with similar characteristics. As would be expected with a whole-school intervention, the effect of academy status took time to improve performance. The academies open for between four and six years showed the most significant improvement. The intake of pupils in the new academies had better ability than previously, although this only explains part of the improvement in attainment in these academies. Giving the school a new name, new leadership and new buildings meant academies were no longer the 'sink' school in an area, but a desirable school for parents to actively choose for their child. There were also wider effects on neighbouring schools, where despite a drop in their intake ability, results improved modestly too.

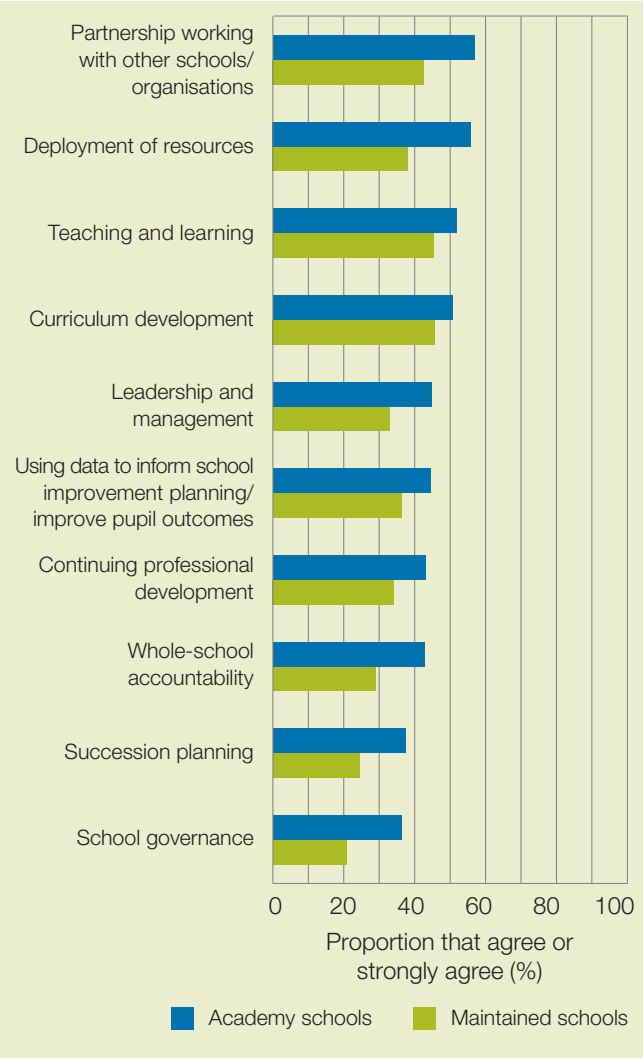
The early academies programme was a jolt to the school landscape that generated long-lasting benefits to the pupils in these schools and to neighbouring schools, but questions remain about its value for money given the huge public investment in new buildings, staff recruitment and leadership development. Academisation of underperforming schools has continued ever since, though with a reduced budget: the National Audit Office (NAO) estimates that the amount spent per sponsored academy has dropped by 83 per cent between 2010 and 2014 from £2.6m per secondary school to £450,000 (NAO, 2014). It is still too early to know whether the positive impacts of the early sponsored academies have been replicated in recent years despite the substantial reduction in funding, but our research has shown significant short-term benefits (Worth, 2014).

Autonomy

The policy principle that school autonomy was the driving force behind school success encouraged the coalition government to make it possible for all schools to become academies. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012) has indicated that the most successful school systems are ones which combine school autonomy with strong accountability. Academy status is intended to enable a school to take innovative approaches to the way the school is run, including governance, resource deployment, and curriculum development. It is too early to say what the pupil performance benefits of academy conversion among high-performing schools are, but our research has found the attainment benefits of academisation for pupils in converter academies are limited in the short term (Worth, 2014).

Furthermore, our research from a nationally representative sample of teachers shows the proportion of academy staff citing the full use of the new freedoms in their school is still relatively low. Among academy staff, only just over one-third think their school is adopting an innovative approach to governance or succession planning; just over two-fifths think this is true in relation to leadership, accountability, data use and CPD. While more than half believe their academy adopts an innovative approach for curriculum development, teaching and learning, resource deployment and partnership working, these figures are only slightly higher than for maintained schools (although this difference is statistically significant). The former coalition government's intermediate goal of encouraging academy schools to set their own path has so far not taken off in the way the government had hoped.

Data shows that neither academies nor maintained schools take advantage of new freedoms[2]



2 Note: the question to academy school staff was: "The autonomy that comes with being an Academy enables my school to adopt an innovative approach to ...". The question to maintained school staff was: "Increased school freedoms enable my school to adopt an innovative approach to ...". N = 484 (academies), 837 (maintained). The difference in average agreement expressed as a Likert scale (-2 = strongly disagree to 2 = strongly agree, and where 'no autonomy' = -2) across the 10 areas, between academies and maintained schools is statistically significant at the 5 per cent level. Source: NFER Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey, May 2014

Governance and collaboration

A further feature of academy schools is the emergence of governance structures covering a number of schools. Multi-academy trusts (MATs), single legal entities accountable for all schools in an academy chain through a funding agreement directly with the DfE, are DfE's preferred governance structure for academies (NGA, 2014). The number and size of sponsors that oversee the boards of several academy schools has grown alongside the growth of academy schools themselves, but not as fast. This year, for the first time, fewer than half of academies are part of a MAT (Ofsted, 2014). Any future growth in MATs will require more capacity – existing chains growing and new chains developing – to ensure trusts are able to effectively govern the schools for which they are responsible.

Schools accountable to the same MAT have the opportunity to "build on existing partnerships, work collaboratively and support schools to improve attainment" (NCTL, 2014). Are the new governance structures helping academies to improve, and do they encourage schools to collaborate more? The innovative practice most cited by academy teachers in our Teacher Voice survey was partnership working with other schools and organisations (57 per cent). DfE research has also found that many academy schools support other schools (Cirin, 2014). However, it found that academies "often receive support from academies within a trust of which they are not a member" (*ibid*), demonstrating that collaboration is not necessarily limited to formal governance structures.

The evidence is still emerging on the impact of school-to-school collaboration, and whether collaboration with schools with the same formal governance structure, e.g. accountable to the same MAT, or within looser collaborative arrangements like umbrella trusts and collaborative partnerships is relatively more effective. The Education Select Committee concluded that "given the high level of enthusiasm for school collaboration, it is striking that definitive evidence of its impact is lacking" (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education Select Committee, 2013). There is little hard evidence of school-to-school collaboration having an impact on students' educational outcomes, though there is some qualitative evidence that partnering can have benefits. More research is needed to understand the contribution that school-to-school collaboration makes, particularly whether collaboration is effective in supporting underperforming schools to improve, and how the governance structure interacts with opportunities to collaborate.

The challenges ahead

The early academies programme demonstrated that new leadership and new investment in a consistently underperforming school could radically alter the local perceptions of the school and the prospects of the pupils, with positive effects on neighbouring schools as well. However, it is unclear how much of the impact was due to the autonomy the school was given. Even if the autonomy enabled many of the changes that were made to turn low-performing schools around, it is questionable whether those benefits are of the same value to a high-performing school. Extending autonomy to a wider selection of schools seems to have had little short-term impact on schools adopting innovative approaches or on pupil performance, relative to schools in the maintained sector.

Further expansion in the number of academy schools in the next parliament would need several things to justify it:

- **A clearly articulated theory of change**. Why are schools being encouraged or compelled to become academies? What specific change will academisation lead to in those schools, and how will those changes translate into beneficial changes in pupil outcomes?

- **The right evidence**. Academies are very different in different areas and contexts. Drawing the lessons from existing practice needs to take this into account. The early academies led to significantly improved outcomes in the lowest performing schools, but it doesn't follow that autonomy for all schools will have the same impact. Similarly, it doesn't follow that academisation of underperforming primary schools will have the same impact as that found in secondary schools: more evidence is needed on the impact of academisation on primary school outcomes.

- **Evaluation**. Outcome evaluation is essential to understand the impact of changes on pupils. Good quality evaluation requires a clear set of goals and the ability to make accurate comparisons, to assess whether the goals have been achieved. Recent policy implementation has been a blizzard of changes that make robust evaluation of different approaches in different contexts very difficult. Assessing the short-term impact of changes to the conversion process, and the mechanisms for establishing collaborative structures, also needs to be embedded in any expansion.

- **Sufficient capacity**. Are there enough sponsors? DfE regarded 18 existing sponsors as lacking the capacity to take on more schools (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education Select Committee, 2014), and sponsors regarded as successful already overseeing a lot of schools may well struggle if they are expected to expand. Capacity will need time to develop and build, limiting the speed of further successful expansion.

- **Accountability**. What if it goes wrong in some cases? Schools of all types should be accountable to the parents whose children they teach and to the taxpayers that fund them. Academisation is not an option for underperforming schools that are already academies, so a future government needs oversight and interventions that are appropriate for all types of school.

Conclusions

The number of academy schools has grown rapidly since their introduction, with around a thousand school conversions per year since 2011. Any future government will need to assess whether further expansion is warranted – particularly in primary schools – and, if so, clearly argue the case for what changes academisation will make, whether they are feasible, how those changes will lead to long-term benefit for learners, and why change cannot be achieved better in another way.

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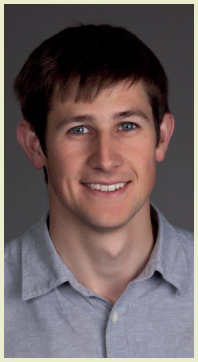
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A guide to the evidence on academies (Sims, Grayson and Wespieser, 2015).
A rapid review of evidence on the performance of academy schools based on 13 key studies.

School choice: The parent view (Wespieser, Durbin and Sims, 2015).
Data from NFER's survey of 1005 parents investigating views on school choice, local accountability, and academies.

Jack Worth



Jack is an experienced economist and statistician with particular expertise in the use of analytical methods for policy evaluation and value-for-money analysis.

As part of the NFER Education Trials Unit, he has developed trial protocols and conducted impact analysis, and also has experience with quasi-experimental evaluation techniques.

With a master's in economics, Jack has a particular interest in academy schools in England. He is currently working on research commissioned by the Local Government Association to investigate how performance in national examinations in academy secondary schools compares to performance in similar non-academies, to attempt to find out whether performance was better than it might have been otherwise.

As part of that programme of research, in 2014 he authored the research report: *Analysis of academy school performance in GCSEs 2013*, which was cited in the Education Select Committee's academies and free schools report.

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