

Chain effects 2018

Introduction and background

There are currently over 7,500 academies in England, more than a third of all schools. In the secondary sector, academies and free schools now comprise the vast majority of schools. Of these, about two-thirds are schools, often among the more successful, that have ‘converted’ to gain academy status. The remaining third are ‘sponsored’ academies, which conform more to the original purpose of the academy project: to improve the fortunes of the UK’s most under-performing schools. Sponsor-led academies have been promoted by successive governments as an effective way to improve the educational achievement of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. As the academies programme has developed, policymakers have increasingly seen academy chains, and especially multi-academy trusts (MATs) as the best way of working to improve the performance of previously struggling schools.

Although the Department for Education (DfE) now reports annually on MAT performance, there has been less attention to outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. The Chain Effects annual reports aim to address this gap, and remain the only analysis of the effectiveness of this policy strategy on the attainment of disadvantaged young people.

This is the 5th and final report in the series. It uses 2017 Key Stage 4 exam results and reviews findings over 5 years. In order to be included, academy chains have to have had at least 3 academies in 2017 and at least two secondary sponsored academies for a three-year period from September 2013. The academies included have also been with the same sponsor since September 2014 so that there has been time for the sponsor to have an impact on performance. The report reviews outcomes for disadvantaged secondary pupils across a range of measures including Progress 8 and Attainment 8.

The limitations of the report must be borne in mind. Firstly, only 46 per cent of the sponsored academies which existed in 2017 are included. The remainder had either not been academies for 3 years or were in MATs which did not meet the criteria for inclusion. Secondly, it must not be assumed that all academies in a chain are similar – they often vary in terms of both pupil attainment and Ofsted ratings.

Key points

Current policy issues

- The DfE has already acknowledged that there is a risk of having an insufficient number of high quality sponsors and MATs available to support underperforming schools. The difficulty in finding sponsors has led to an increase in the time it takes between being judged Inadequate and opening as an academy. The National Audit Office reports an average wait of 18 months. Another factor here is the fact that trusts are unwilling to take on certain schools, for example those which have financial issues or which are geographically isolated.
- The quality of sponsors is also an issue. In the light of the findings of earlier reports, the Sutton Trust has consistently recommended that Ofsted should be empowered to undertake formal inspections of academy chains. This has not yet happened, although Ofsted has recently announced that their inspections of academies within a MAT will be followed by a visit to the MAT head office.
- Increasing school autonomy was a key part of the original rationale for academisation, in line with findings by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that in countries where schools have greater

autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to perform better. Furthermore, the government has always stressed the fact that academies have more autonomy than schools which are under local authority control. However, many MATs now require their academies to adopt a prescribed curriculum and practices, and the individual academies therefore have little or no autonomy. Schools in a MAT are no longer legal entities and cannot decide to leave the MAT.

The performance of disadvantaged pupils in 2017

- The report looks at the performance of disadvantaged students within the chains in terms of Attainment 8 and Progress 8 scores. Attainment 8 is a numerical measure of a pupil’s attainment across a suite of 8 subjects. A pupil’s Progress 8 score is calculated by comparing their Attainment 8 score to the scores of pupils nationally who had the same results at the end of Key Stage 2. The school’s Progress 8 score is the average of the pupils’ scores.

- Half of the analysis group chains had above average Progress 8 scores, whereas less than a third had above average Attainment 8. This indicates that pupil progress in sponsored academies is generally better in comparison to national figures than their level of attainment.
- Chains that do well on one measure tend to do well on the other. This is particularly the case for 3 chains: City of London, Diocese of London and Harris Federation.
- There is, however, a cluster of chains where progress is above average but attainment has not yet reached that level. In 2 chains, attainment is above average but progress below average (Haberdashers and Mercers). Worryingly, both progress and attainment are below the national average in almost half the chains.
- Grade 4 passes in English and maths are an important benchmark, as they open the door to a large number of further opportunities. The numbers of disadvantaged pupils in academy chains achieving this benchmark is therefore of interest.
- More than half the chains had a higher percentage of pupils achieving this measure in 2017 than 2015, though in some cases the improvement was very small. The most notable improvement was made by Dixons.
- However, over a third of chains, including some which did well in 2015, had a lower percentage of pupils passing both English and maths in 2017. It is possible that they had adapted less well to the demands of the reformed 2017 English and maths GCSEs. In 2015 18 of the chains exceeded the national percentage of pupils achieving grade 4 or above in English and maths, but in 2017 only 11 did so.
- In 2017, in the vast majority of chains, less than half of disadvantaged pupils achieved this measure. The highest proportions of disadvantaged pupils achieving the measure were in City of London, Diocese of London, Harris, Outwood, Ark and Dixons.
- The EBacc continues to be achieved by only a small minority of disadvantaged pupils nationally and in the analysis group.
- Although EBacc entry is now a government accountability measure, chains are taking widely varying approaches to it. For example, Outwood Grange and Grace, both of which had more than the national average scores for disadvantaged pupils for both Progress 8 and Attainment 8, entered only 19 per cent and 10 per cent respectively of disadvantaged pupils for all EBacc subjects – well below the national figure of 27 per cent of disadvantaged pupils.
- However, of the 19 per cent entered at Outwood, 13 per cent achieved the EBacc. In other chains, entry rates were much higher but success rates much lower. The David Mellor chain entered 36 per cent of its pupils for all EBacc subjects, but had an EBacc achievement rate of just 1.4 per cent. This may lend weight to the argument that it is inappropriate to enter pupils for exams in which they have a high chance of failure. Furthermore, most of the chains with a high level of EBacc entry among their disadvantaged pupils showed little or no increase in the percentage achieving both English and maths.
- In most chains the attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged groups is smaller than the national average. This pattern has remained unchanged over the 5 years of this analysis. It may be partially explained by the large numbers and relatively low performance of those pupils not classified as disadvantaged within these chains, but who would be broadly considered working class.
- In most chains, Attainment 8 scores were below the national average for both disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils. In just 7 chains Attainment 8 scores were above the national average for both groups.
- The figures for progress are more encouraging; in half the

chains, disadvantaged pupils have made better progress than the national average, and in 43 per cent this is the case for non-disadvantaged pupils.

- As in previous reports, a single overall measure of the attainment of disadvantaged pupils has been created, combining measures of both attainment and progress. The components of this measure are: average Attainment 8 score; Progress 8 score; and the proportion of pupils achieving a standard pass or above in English and mathematics.
- In 2017 just two chains (City of London and Diocese of London) were 'well above average' in all measures. A further six were 'above average' or 'well above' for all measures: Harris, Dixons, Outward Grange, ARK, Sidney Stringer, and United Learning. At the other end of the scale, the 'below average' group is much larger, and 5 chains are 'well below average' on each measure (David Meller, Eastern, Midland, Tapton, and Wakefield).

Changes in performance 2013-2017

- In comparison with all secondary schools, a higher proportion of analysis group academies were judged as Requires Improvement or Inadequate (using the most recent inspection grades). While the proportion in these categories decreased between 2014 and 2017, the gap between the analysis group and the national figures remains very much the same..
- Looking at the 26 chains which have been in existence throughout the period of the analysis, there is a narrowing of the gap between 2016 and 2017.
- The analysis looked at the percentage of schools below the government's floor standard. These are schools with a progress 8 score of lower than -0.5.
- Looking at all the chains in the group each year shows that the proportion of academies below the floor standard in the analysis group was higher than the national figure each year, but that the gap between the two groups has narrowed.
- Nevertheless, in 2017, 25 out of 58 analysis group chains had at least one school below the floor standard. When we look only at the 26 chains which were in the analysis through the period, the picture is more encouraging, with fewer schools in this group below the floor than the national average.
- In comparison with the national pattern, overall performance of disadvantaged pupils in analysis group chains declined between 2013 and 2016 but has improved in 2017.
- Of the original 26 chains in the analysis, the greatest improvement in rankings for overall improvement has been at Grace, which has gone from 25th to 8th place.
- There is clear evidence of 'game playing' to improve performance measures, in particularly the practice of 'off-rolling' Year 11 pupils. A recent investigation by The Guardian showed that nationally, the number of pupils 'off-rolled' before they take their GCSE exams has risen and was 2 per cent in 2018 (compared with just 0.1% seven years earlier). But the loss of students in some academy trusts was very much higher. Combining figures for the last two years, Harris and Delta (formerly SPTA), lost 7 per cent of their pupils, and Aldridge and Inspiration also lost over 5 per cent.
- Chains with better overall results tend to share a number of characteristics including: being longer established and having grown slowly; having fewer pupils with lower prior attainment; learning from the strategies used in other trusts; having strategies to respond to changes in the curriculum; and having a sustained mission to improving the education of disadvantaged pupils.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/chain-effects-2018-academy-chains/>