

The benefits of Academies and Free Schools

What are Free Schools and Academies?

- Free Schools and Academies are non-selective state-funded schools¹ that are run by charitable organisations called Academy Trusts. These schools are given more freedom over budget, staffing and curriculum than local authority run schools. They are held accountable through a clear “contract” with the state: if the school stops performing well, then the government can rapidly act to improve it.
- There are different kinds of schools within the overall “Academy” brand:
 - Free Schools. Free Schools are completely new schools – set up in areas with too few places or where standards are low. They are set up by existing successful schools, by groups of teachers, by parents, or by communities - and they have the freedom to innovate. There are over 300 Free Schools in England. The programme started in 2010.
 - Sponsored Academies. Sponsored Academies are created when an existing school is failing: if it is not giving pupils an adequate education. The Government then replaces the current school’s management with a new “sponsor” – who will usually already run very successful schools and be given additional freedoms to turn the school around. The programme started in 2000.
 - Converter Academies. Converter Academies are created when an existing, high-quality school chooses to become an Academy – usually because they want the additional freedoms. There are around 3,600 converter Academies. The programme started in 2010.
- What links all Academies and Free Schools together are:
 - They have more freedom.
 - They are held accountable in a clear way: through a formal “agreement” (called a Funding Agreement, which is a legally enforceable contract between the school and the Secretary of State) with the government setting out how they have to perform.
- This is very important: it means we judge schools on how well they do but lets the professionals and parents decide exactly what the school should do.
- Academy numbers are growing every month either as schools continue to convert away from Local Authority control, or are turned into sponsored Academies by the government.

Are Free Schools and Academies a good thing?

We think that the Academy and Free School programme are important reforms, for three main reasons.

1) Autonomy is important

¹ Some 16-19 free schools are academically selective, as are many school 6th forms and 6th form colleges

In almost every leading education country, for the past thirty years, the trend has been to give headteachers and teachers more freedom. Heads know how to run schools better than government.

There is also a large body of international evidence that shows that by giving head teachers and school leaders more freedom, results improve. For example:

- The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has found: “the creation of more autonomous schools will lead to innovations in curriculum, instruction and governance, which in turn will improve outcomes.”
- Eric Hanushek, one of the world’s leading education economists, found that autonomy reforms improve student achievement in developed countries.
- Studies in countries from Belgium to South Korea have found that increased autonomy improves performance.²

2) The Academy and Free School program produces top performing schools

- Free Schools and Academies are more likely to be rated “Outstanding” than other schools. 26% of Free Schools and 26% of Academies are rated Outstanding by Ofsted, compared to 19% of local authority schools.³ [Data correct as of 31st December 2015]
- In 2011, the London School of Economics found that the Academy program significantly improved pupil performance.
- The Department for Education found that the longer Academies were open, the more their results improved.
 - Converter academies previously rated as good have been found to be both more likely to improve this rating to Outstanding than local authority schools and less likely to achieve a lower rating (Gov.uk).⁴
 - Free Schools are extremely popular with parents. Free Schools attract **3.5** applications per school place, whereas maintained schools get **2.3** applications per place (New Schools Network).⁵

3) New innovative schools improve the rest

- Research by Policy Exchange in 2015 revealed that Free Schools raise standards not only for themselves but also for those around them: secondary schools geographically close to free schools were found to have matched or outperformed both local authority and national levels of progress every year since 2010 (*A Rising Tide*, P.19).
- Free Schools are particularly helpful in poorer areas – high poverty schools close to Free Schools perform stronger than more affluent schools close to Free Schools (*A Rising Tide*, P.28).

² Hindriks et al, Hahn et al

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/maintained-schools-and-academies-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-december-2015>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/performance-of-converter-academies-in-2012-to-2013>

⁵ <http://www.newschoolsnetwork.org/sites/default/files/Free%20schools%20outstrip%20council-run%20schools%20in%20popularity.pdf>

- Some of the most important curricular reforms in recent years – for example the Maths Mastery program – were started by Academy groups and then spread to the rest of the system, because Academies innovate and try new methods.

Expanding the programme

It is true that Academies are not a panacea: there are poorly performing Academies and Free Schools, and we believe Government should take action to improve them, give them to another Academy Trust, or even close them.

However, the potential for Free Schools and Academies is huge. There are examples of schools and groups of schools up and down the country who have improved significantly and transformed children's life chances as a result of being able to do things that best suit their pupils and their communities.

We believe that the Free School and Academy programme should expand. But autonomy is only effective if heads, teachers and Academy Trusts make sensible decisions and focus on things which we know can improve standards. Parents & Teachers for Excellence campaigns not only for autonomy, but for schools to do the right things with their autonomy, namely:

- Deliver a rich knowledge-based curriculum
- Ensure excellent behaviour and discipline
- Have world-beating assessments; and
- Offer enrichment through a longer school day

If those things happen, then Academies and Free Schools can continue to transform lives.