Lessons Learned

Looking back at the impact of schools reform in England

Gavin Rice, Lucia Goodwin

Foreword by Rt Hon Michael Gove

ONWARD

About Onward

Onward's mission is to develop bold and practical ideas to boost economic opportunity, build national resilience, and strengthen communities across all parts of the United Kingdom. We are not affiliated to any party but believe in mainstream conservatism. Our vision is to address the needs of the whole country: young and old, urban and rural, for all communities across the UK – particularly places that have too often felt neglected or ignored by Westminster.

We believe in an optimistic conservatism that is truly national – one that recognises the value of markets, supported by a streamlined state that is active not absent. We are unapologetic about standing up to vested interests, putting power closer to people, and supporting the hardworking and aspirational.

Thanks

Onward is a small non-profit that relies on the generosity of our donors and patrons to do our work. We are indebted to our Founding Patrons: Martyn Rose, Michael Spencer, David Meller, Bjorn Saven, Richard Oldfield, Robert Walters, Tim Sanderson, James Alexandroff, Jason Dalby, Graham Edwards, John Nash and Theodore Agnew. Without this philanthropic support, our work would not be possible.

About the authors

Gavin Rice is the Head of Political Economy at Onward. Before joining Onward, he was Policy Director at the Centre for Social Justice and a Special Adviser in the Department for Exiting the EU. He writes for The Telegraph and The Critic and is the author of numerous policy reports.

Lucia Goodwin is a researcher at Onward and has worked on several reports on the 'Reshaping the State' programme. She previously worked as an intern in the Environmental and Social Governance team at PwC. She holds a BA in Geography from the University of Cambridge.

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Foreword

Looking back on the period of Conservative-led government over the last fourteen years, there were many successes of which we can be proud, as well as deep challenges left facing the country. One area of almost undisputed success is the reforms to primary and secondary education in England we began in 2010. This is something on which there is a great deal of consensus across the political divide. While the system is far from perfect, on almost every measure pupils in England achieved better results, were better taught, and were left better prepared for later life than when we came into power.

The process of academisation actually began under the previous Labour government, pioneered by figures like Lord Adonis and David Blunkett. Our period in office, initially alongside the Liberal Democrats, saw the expansion of the academy system across England so that now more than half of all state schools are academies. We created multi-academy trusts, which proved effective at championing innovation, rewarding strong school leaders, facilitating collaboration between schools and at turning failing schools around. And we allowed the founding of free schools, some of which are now the most successful schools in the country. I am proud that in addition to overall improvements to standards the disadvantage gap fell at Key Stage 4 during our period in office before the onset of the Covid pandemic.

The underlying principle behind our reforms was that of school freedom. Handing decision-making over children's education to teachers - the professionals - was long overdue. While there are excellent maintained schools, it is not right that anyone - including local authorities - should have a monopoly on schools. As part of promoting school choice, we pioneered the creation of free schools, some of which are now the highest performing in the country.

The improvements to schools in England speak for themselves, with pupils in England shooting up international league tables in reading, writing, maths and science. Now 89% of schools in England are rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted, compared to just 68% in 2009-10. This is due not only to our changes to governance and accountability; it also reflects our insistence on academic rigour, a knowledge-rich curriculum and our belief that no child is incapable of achieving academic excellence, no matter their background. I am proud to have worked with colleagues like Nick Gibb and David Laws to make this a reality. And these achievements stand sadly in stark contrast to what we see in Wales, where education is devolved, and pupils perform only as well as the most disadvantaged in England.

Challenges do remain. More needs to be done to tackle inequality and there needs to be better provision for pupils with SEND. Academisation and free schools have not been evenly spread, with more progress in London and the South East, and the country suffers from educational “cold spots”. We still struggle with teacher recruitment and retention. However, Labour’s Schools Bill, currently before Parliament, will do nothing to address these. Instead, it risks putting the process of academisation into reverse, ending school freedoms and giving power back to local bureaucrats. It will end the successful system of converting underperforming schools into academies and threatens to undermine academy freedoms over recruitment and admissions. It is a step precisely in the wrong direction.

Reforms to school structures and standards are a major success - one of which we should be proud. This Government should commit to finishing the reforms we started and complete the shift towards academy trusts and free schools, so every child and young adult can receive the education they deserve. This timely and important report by Onward makes crystal clear the successes and remaining challenges facing our schools, arguing precisely this case.

Rt Hon Michael Gove

Secretary of State for Education 2010 – 2014, Editor of the Spectator

Executive summary

Towards the end of the New Labour governments, it became clear the school system was under-performing and under-delivering. Progress had ostensibly been made in reducing educational inequality and child poverty and in the share of pupils gaining a good set of GCSEs. But evidence showed that overall standards were stagnating or even declining. Grade inflation was a documented phenomenon, under-performing schools encouraged pupils to take "softer" subjects, and fashionable but poorly evidenced teaching techniques had become standard.

Labour had already started to reform the school system by introducing self-governing academies. Governments from 2010 onwards took steps to increase their number and to ease the process of academisation. They created multi-academy trusts (MATs) under the leadership of executive headteachers,, moved underperforming schools to academies, and introduced new "free schools" where there was parental demand. The Conservative-led governments also implemented major changes to the teaching of literacy and numeracy, particularly at Key Stage 1. They introduced significant reforms to standards and assessment at GCSE and A-level, brought in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), and shifted towards a knowledge-first approach to the curriculum.

In April 2024, over 50% of all state-funded schools were academies[1], with 56% of all pupils attending one.[2] At secondary level, the numbers are higher: 80% have academy status.[3] Academies not only increased school freedoms over pupil admissions, recruitment and the curriculum. The establishment and rollout of multi-academy trusts (MATs) moved the school system towards an outcome-driven meritocracy, with the best executive headteachers able to take on underperforming schools and offer them improved leadership. And the creation of free schools, modelled on the US charter schools system, allowed new schools to be created wherever there was parental demand.

Becoming an Academy had an outsized impact on struggling schools. Recent data shows that more than seven out of ten sponsored academies now have a "Good" or "Outstanding" rating, compared to just one in ten of the local authority-maintained schools they replaced.[4] The underlying principle of academisation is that local government should not have a monopoly on children's education, and that innovation and best practice should be able to thrive.

The schools reform programme also implemented a range of improvements to GCSE and A-level qualifications, new teaching methods such as phonics and maths mastery, and a knowledge-rich approach to the curriculum. This sought

to shift away from the previous dominance of "progressive" teaching methods focusing primarily on skills rather than knowledge and understanding.

In education policy it can be hard to prove categorically that reforms lead directly to outcomes, given the variation in pupil cohorts and the problem of controlling for variables. However, the overall picture of English school performance is one of significant improvement to standards. The combination of structural reform and improvements to standards have been a big part of the story in contributing to this success. And the improvements to outcomes in England stand in marked contrast to the picture in Wales and Scotland, where education is devolved.

In the international TIMSS league tables, Year 5 pupils in England have consistently outperformed their Western counterparts in science and maths. And the PIRLS study, which measures reading performance, ranks pupils in England as fourth best globally and best in the western world. Between 2009 and 2022, England rose in the OECD PISA school rankings from 27th in the world for maths performance to 11th. In science, England rose from 16th to 13th. Attainment in England has improved to such an extent that pupils in Wales, which has not undergone the same process of reform, now perform only as well as disadvantaged pupils in England.[5]

On domestic measures, 89% of schools are now ranked Good or Outstanding by Ofsted as of July 2024, compared to just 68% in 2009-10. London has had the highest share of Good or Outstanding schools since 2015, when it was just 40%, but in 2024 rose to 96%. And the North East, which previously had the lowest share of Good or Outstanding Schools (26%) increased its share to over 92%.

Challenges undoubtedly remain. Progress has been geographically uneven, with the persistence of educational "cold spots". While twice as many disadvantaged pupils are enrolling in more rigorous English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects as when it was introduced, progress has stalled. The gap in provision and outcomes for pupils with special educational needs (SEND) remains pronounced. And the academisation process was never completed, with just under half of state schools remaining under local authority control.

However, the proposed changes in the Government's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (hereafter, "Schools Bill") will not address these challenges. Rather, they risk undermining the progress that has been made as a result of schools reform. Ending academy freedoms over recruitment, the curriculum and admissions threatens to remove the flexibility that makes them successful. And

giving local authorities the power to block academy expansion will tilt the balance back towards local government control, risking a return to an era of lower standards.

The reform programme championed by Conservative-led governments reflected vital principles, laid out in the final chapter of this report: principles of competition, school freedom, making space for innovation, ending state monopoly and trusting professionals. These are the right principles for ongoing reform of the school system because they have led to measurable improvements in standards. That reform needs to be completed, not reversed.

Introduction

The Conservative-led governments from 2010 onwards embarked on a series of wide-ranging reforms to school governance, structures and standards, drawing on early reforms started under New Labour but significantly expanding their scope and reach. In January 2010, there were just 203 academies with fewer than 200,000 pupils[6], and all of these were secondary schools created under the sponsored academies programme. This programme matched underperforming schools with "sponsor" schools to support rapid improvement.[7]

This report will focus on the reforms to structures - primarily academisation and school governance reform - and standards - focusing on teaching methods, assessment and curriculum content. Chapter 1 will explain the course of the reforms and Chapter 2 will illustrate the wide-ranging improvements to school attainment and performance in England, both by domestic measures and in international league tables. Chapter 3 will consider lessons learned from the reform process, including successes and remaining challenges. It will also consider the likely impact of the Government's proposed Schools Bill on the progress that has been achieved and lay out principles for further positive reform.

Conservative-led reforms to schools in England

From 2010 onwards the reform efforts of the Conservative-led governments left very little of the school system untouched. It is outside the scope of this paper to address in detail every policy change delivered,[8] even with a focus on the Coalition years, when change was the most dramatic. However, this note covers aspects of the reforms that were most significant and have made the largest difference to school standards in England. Some of these reforms are currently being revised in the Government's Schools Bill.[9] These include:

- **Structural reform**: academisation and free schools
- **Standards reform:** changes to primary teaching of reading and maths, reforms to the curriculum and reforms to GCSE and A-levels.

Structural reforms

The wider rolling out of academies

The Academies Act 2010[10] was one of the first pieces of legislation passed by the Coalition Government. It allowed any Outstanding school and most Good schools to immediately convert from local authority control into an academy without the approval or consent of the local authority. In April 2024, over 50% of all state-funded schools were academies[11], with 56% of all pupils attending one.[12] At secondary level, the numbers are even higher: 82% of state-funded schools have academy status.[13]

The legislation allowed schools that had demonstrated excellent leadership to be given the freedom to run themselves, independently of the local authority. The response was positive and popular with school leaders. By 2012 there were almost 2,000 academies, 80% of which were converts.[14]

Box 1: A brief history of academies

Academies were formally introduced by the New Labour government, under whom 203[15] underperforming schools were converted into academies - a relatively small number - under a scheme supported by then Prime Minister Tony Blair and Andrew Adonis, then Minister of State for Schools.[16] But the principle of giving schools more autonomy first started under the government of Margaret Thatcher with grant-maintained schools. England was not unique in this push - the US had Charter Schools[17] and Sweden had "free schools".[18]

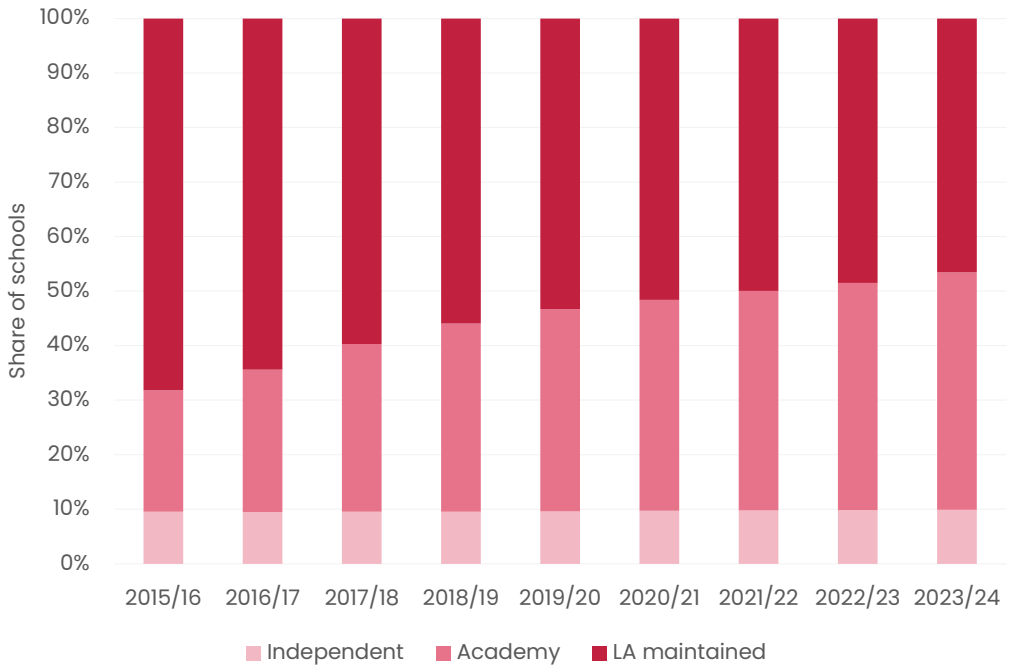
While Labour sought to introduce academies as a targeted way to improve underperforming schools, the Conservatives from 2010 onwards sought to build an entire system of improvement based on the academies model. This involved both expanding the number of academies dramatically and encouraging academies to group together into trusts.

With the passing of the Academies Act 2010 and the Education Act 2011 by the Coalition government, academy numbers surged. In just a year, they doubled to 408, serving nearly 400,000 pupils.[19]

By 2024, over 43% funded primaries and 82% of secondary schools were academies. Since 2015-16, over five million pupils had been educated in over 10,000 academies.[20] Of these, in 2025, 2,785 (24%) were sponsored academies, schools that had previously been underperforming and 7,789 (68%) were converter academies, schools that were usually rated Good or Outstanding before they converted.[21] The majority of the remaining schools in the local authority maintained sector are primary schools (9,606 primary schools out of 11,392 total local authority maintained schools in June 2024).[22]

Figure 1: Share of schools which are LA maintained, academies or independent, 2015/16 - 2023/24[23]

Source: 'School Characteristics', Department for Education



Multi-academy trusts (MATs) and sponsored academies

Using powers granted in the Academies Act, the Department for Education (DfE) could require schools to convert to academy status if they were underperforming by linking the school with an academy "sponsor"".

The Academies Act[24] also introduced multi-academy trusts (MATs), which allowed multiple academies to be grouped together within a single trust with combined leadership.

The Education Act 2011[25] enabled the expansion of MATs by giving them the power to create new schools and by making it easier for local authority-maintained schools to convert and join a MAT. These were the mechanisms through which trusts came to grow, becoming the primary model for school improvement over the last decade. The policy was then expanded further so that any school partnered with an Outstanding school as a sponsor could also become an academy.

Over time the DfE has pursued further policies to grow the number of academies and to encourage re-brokering between trusts to build larger and stronger MATs. This included using the Regional Academy Growth Fund and the Trust Capacity Fund to incentivise existing MATs to take on more schools, while reducing the financial risk of doing so.

The power to require schools to academise if they were rated as Requiring Improvement or worse was called the "R2I" policy or Academisation Order. The purpose of this policy was to tackle underperforming schools that had been found inadequate repeatedly without improvement being delivered by the local authority. It was especially challenging for the education sector as it increased the stakes for Ofsted inspections.

The advantages of academies

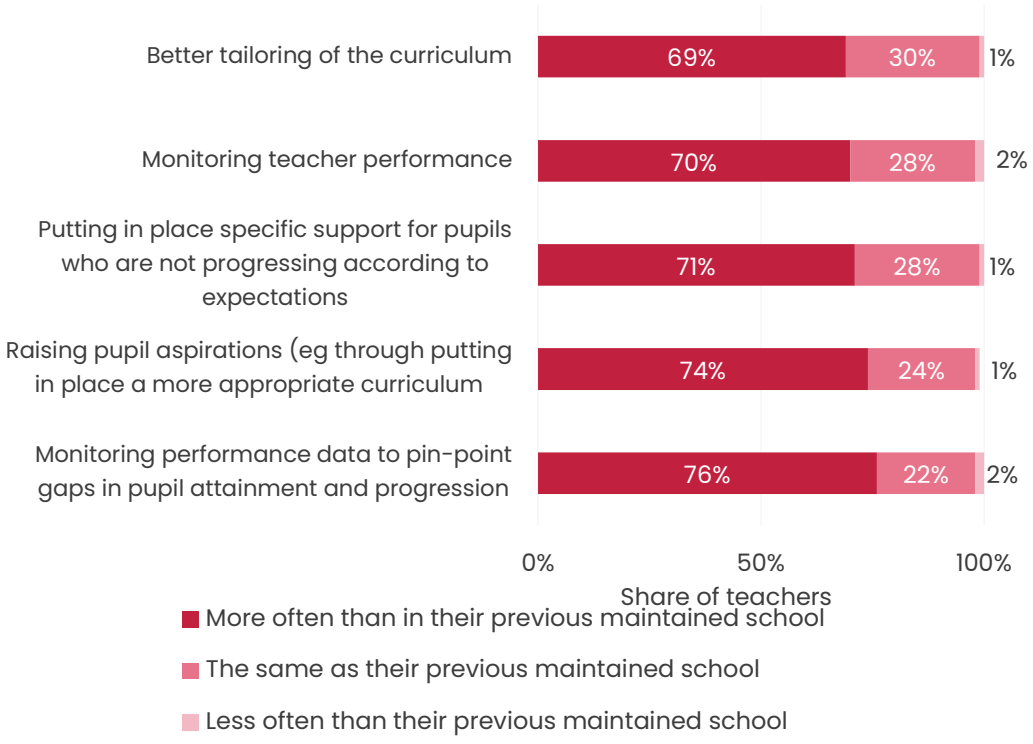
Academisation allowed schools to be tailored to pupils in the local community, with school governance and key aspects of decision-making independent of the local authority. It was designed to increase accountability between teachers, school leaders and parents by promoting school choice. Most importantly, the logic of academisation was that local councillors and officials do not necessarily have expertise in education practice and delivery. In contrast, experienced teachers and school leaders do.

The Conservative-led reforms provided increased freedom over staffing, pay and budgets, preferred management practices, subjects offered and curriculum. MATs allowed the best headteachers to become executives with oversight over several schools, so that multiple schools could benefit from the talent of the best school leaders and so best practice could be shared.

On finances, an academy headteacher or MAT leader is responsible only for educational provision within their school or trust, while local authorities have competing priorities and demands on their budgets. Any financial surplus in a SAT or MAT will be reallocated to improving educational provision. This does not always happen in local authorities. Last year, Kent County council - the largest council in England- said it "couldn't afford" to do school improvement.[26] In academies, budgets are not in competition with other local spending commitments or subject to political pressure from councillors or voters. This separation is particularly important in the current climate where local government funding is already stretched extremely thinly.[27]

Figure 2: Frequency of leadership strategies reported by teachers in sponsored academies who previously worked in maintained schools (from 2012)[28]

Source: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services



Academies aimed to improve accountability

There is more direct accountability over academy performance.[29] This is monitored by regional directors who are directly accountable to the Secretary of State for Education and who intervene promptly in instances of underperformance.[30] In contrast, local authority-maintained schools do not have this direct line of accountability. The local authority officials who oversee them are often not education professionals. And local councillors are themselves accountable to parents only indirectly via local elections in which school performance is rarely a salient campaign issue.

On financial accountability, academies are supervised by the Education Funding Agency, which ensures compliance with a funding agreement to make sure that spending is securing better outcomes for pupils. Unlike local authority-maintained schools, academies are regulated charities, so they prepare annual financial statements that are fully audited by an independent external auditor. Academy schools are all charities held to account through a contract with the government and bound by both company and charity law. That contract enshrines their freedom and keeps them accountable for their results.

Teachers say academies are more accountable. Within the academy structure, teachers and school leaders have responsibility for outcomes, whereas within the local authority model those held accountable for school performance (councillors) do not actively run schools. A 2019 Ofsted report[31] surveyed teachers and school leaders of MATs for their views on the accountability and leadership processes within academies versus their experience before joining the MAT. Respondents commonly reported that the level of accountability was greater than that which they had experienced before the school joined the MAT.[32] The MATs surveyed used a variety of mechanisms to hold schools to account, including performance reviews and monitoring visits. As one participant said: "*accountability makes a difference: we really are accountable, and it makes a big impact – much better than non-academies and other MATs we've worked in.*"

However, while academies have stronger and clearer lines of accountability on finances and standards than local authority-maintained schools, there is some evidence that school leadership is not always fully responsive to parents, particularly in large MATs. The 2019 Annual Parent Survey report found that parents whose children are in local authority-maintained schools were more likely to report feeling heard by their school compared to children in SATs or

MATs.[33] One potential reason for this is that it is harder for parents to find information or register concerns about a school within a MAT because the MAT leadership structure is not transparent enough.[34] Sir David Carter, a former schools commissioner, has acknowledged this problem.[35]

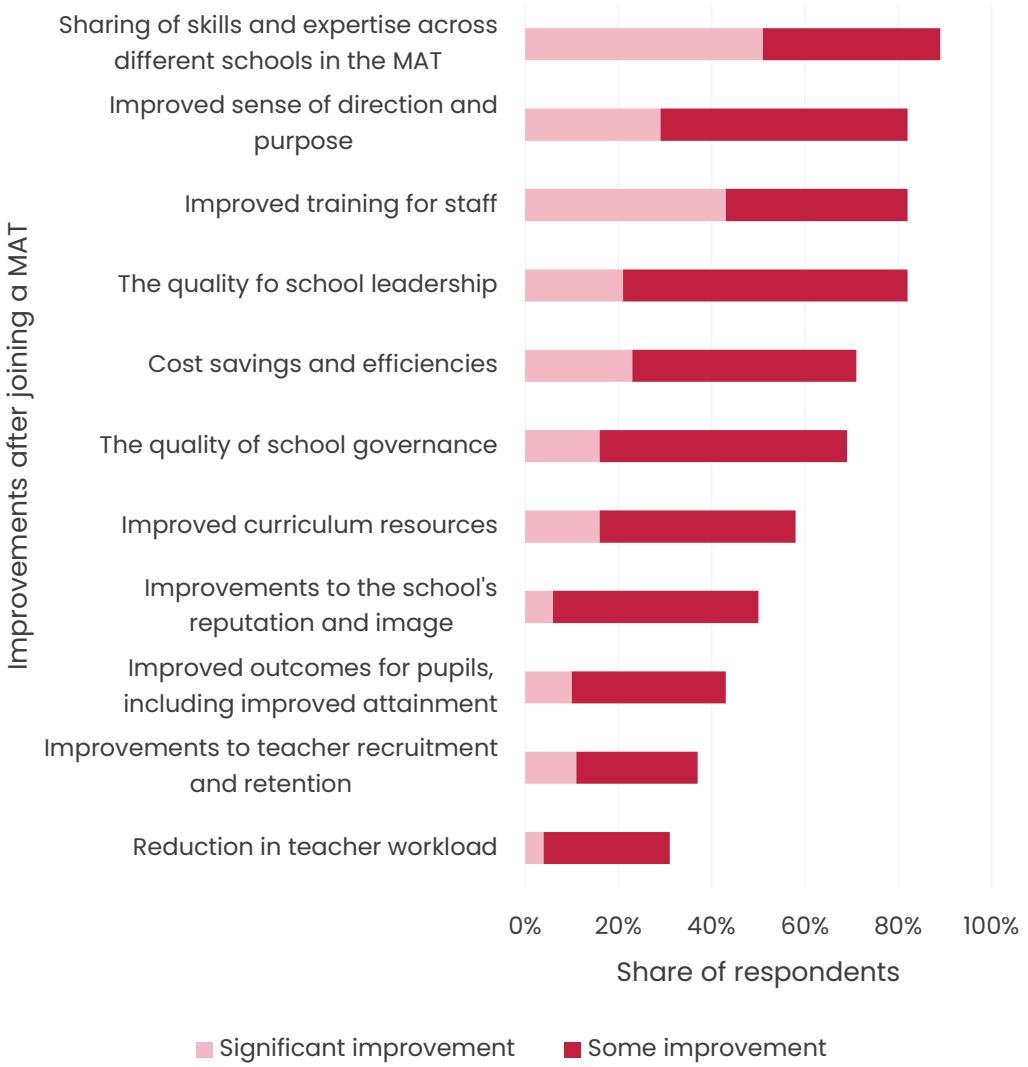
MATs aimed to promote collaboration and best pedagogical practice

School improvement is often most effective when delivered by schools working together with other schools, as opposed to when imposed by government or local authorities. A 2017 survey by the DfE found that 96% of academies in MATs with two or more schools believed their structure had facilitated collaboration with other schools.[36]

One strength of the collaborative MAT structure is that it allows schools to share best practice, facilitating better pedagogy and teacher training. In 2021, the Department for Education conducted research into schools' views on the benefits of joining a multi-academy trust. 89% and 92% of primary and secondary teachers respectively reported that joining a MAT had allowed for sharing skills and expertise across schools.[37] 82% of primary and 83% of secondary teachers said the MAT improved training for staff.[38] One teacher wrote that, since joining the MAT, '"*we have been able to offer greater capacity in staff working and supporting other schools, Intra MAT support has increased significantly with year group teams, subject teams, curriculum teams, teaching and learning teams and leadership teams.*"[39]

Figure 3: Share of respondents listing an improvement after joining a MAT

Source: Department for Education, 2021[40]



MATs collaborative structure also enables school leaders to learn more quickly and to scale successful strategies in a way that is harder with standalone schools.[41] The MAT model allows one highly effective headteacher to deploy their leadership and skill set across multiple schools rather than just one, because an executive headteacher has decision-making authority over all the schools in the MAT.

Box 2: Case study - Outwood Grange

Outwood Grange Academy Trust (OGAT) has 41 schools in the North East of England.[42] Of these, 28 were rated less than Good when they joined the trust, and 18 were in special measures.[43] Of the 20 schools that have been inspected by Ofsted since joining the trust, 19 have been judged Good or Outstanding.[44] The trust is particularly known for its curriculum-led financial planning.

Under the management of Martyn Oliver, the former Outwood CEO and current Chief Inspector of Ofsted, Outwood Grange was able to take over a large number of schools and overturn a pattern of poor leadership.[45] The trust has a seven-strand transformation model, developed over 20 years, which sets out what leaders need to do when they go into a "stuck school".[46] This includes leadership with vision and efficacy; quality in the classroom; curriculum design; monitoring and intervention; systems and policies; targeted professional development; and a culture of praise for staff and students.[47]

Specifically, OGAT has a Transformative Leadership Model which consists of four levels of management.

- **Members**: scrutinise the performance of the Board.
- **Board**: is scrutinized by the CEO, CEPs and CO at the macro level, including progress against the improvement plan.
- **Regional Boards:** these are made up of Chairs of Academy Councils and individuals who offer specific regional knowledge and expertise. The board is chaired by a Trustee, supported centrally by the trust, and also contains a member of the Executive team who is responsible for executing the Trust's strategic intent and meeting key performance indicators, such as performance across all key stages.
- **Academy Councils:** these are made up of the Principal and Academy leadership teams in individual schools. Academy councils are responsible for ensuring individual academies are performing well and maintaining good community relations.

This leadership structure brings together leaders from across the MAT, '*affording greater collaboration and a further co-construction of practice*' which has been '*instrumental in our ability to raise standards*', according to OGAT themselves.[48] The MAT structure has allowed the trust to take over a large number of schools and apply this vision, turning around persistently underperforming schools.

The collaborative nature of MATs allows for economies of scale and better financial management

MATs by their nature are able to pool resources and make independent financial decisions. Procuring at scale can help to reduce overheads, and MATs can make their funding go further through finding efficiencies and directing funds to the most needed interventions across each trust. In almost all cases they will have a CFO or COO who is able to support their schools to make sound financial decisions.[49]

For example, EG Delta Academies Trust used Integrated Curriculum Financial Planning to maintain a 10% surplus, which could then be re-invested.[50] These schools are therefore more resilient to shocks and funding changes. Another example is Inspiration Trust which has been able to extend their school day without any help from Government through pooling resources and hiring a fundraising manager to make up the additional capital needed.[51]

Box 3: Case study - Integrated Curriculum Financial Planning at Delta Academies Trust[52]

Integrated curriculum and financial planning (ICFP) is a management process that helps schools plan the best curriculum for their pupils with the funding they have available.[53] It involves measuring the current curriculum, staffing structure and costs, funding and pupil numbers. The school must then decide on its ideal curriculum, staff to student ratio and teacher load. These two sets of data are then analysed to provide the school with information about the number of teachers needed to deliver the ideal curriculum, and the number of teachers the school can afford. If these numbers are different, the school will need to adjust its ideal inputs (i.e. ideal teacher to student ratio) to reconcile them. Using this information, the school can then create a strategic plan for the next three to five years based on the data they have gathered.

A common model involves planning the ideal curriculum first and adapting finances to achieve it. If the model is too expensive, the school can toggle the key metrics, such as increasing staffing contact ratios, to see what is affordable.[54]

Delta Academies has used ICFP to maintain a 10% surplus, which equated to approximately £14 million in 2021/21.[55] This has been reinvested into areas including capital projects across the Trust. In the recent conversion of Goole

Academy, which joined the trust in 2019, the implementation of ICFP has enabled a complete turnaround of the school's financial position. The trust was able to invest £300,000 in ICT and £150,000 in buildings at the point of joining. The academy has now moved from a £97,000 in-year deficit at the point of conversion to almost £200,000 in-year surplus in September 2022.[56] These savings were reinvested into improving educational outcomes, which has contributed to Goole Academy increasing its Progress 8 scores from -0.44 in 2018 to +0.37 in 2022.[57]

Schools within a MAT are better able to collaborate and pool resources. This has been highlighted by Sir David Carter, a former schools commissioner.[58] He has argued that the structure of academies "*facilitates collaboration*" which allows academies to "*regularly cooperate in ways that deliver efficiencies, such as on payroll, catering and grounds maintenance. In this way, the best central teams are able to take pressure away from school leaders and teachers, enabling them to focus on standards*".[59]

A 2017 survey by the DfE asked teachers how they thought their schools had benefitted since joining a MAT. Of the 96% respondents who said the MAT structure had facilitated better collaboration between schools and 55% of MATs between two to five schools said their structure had allowed them to secure financial efficiencies.[60] Academies have secured efficiencies on a wide range of different services: 80% had collaborated on financial services; 72% on human resources; 68% on facilities management and 59% for ICT learning resources.[61]

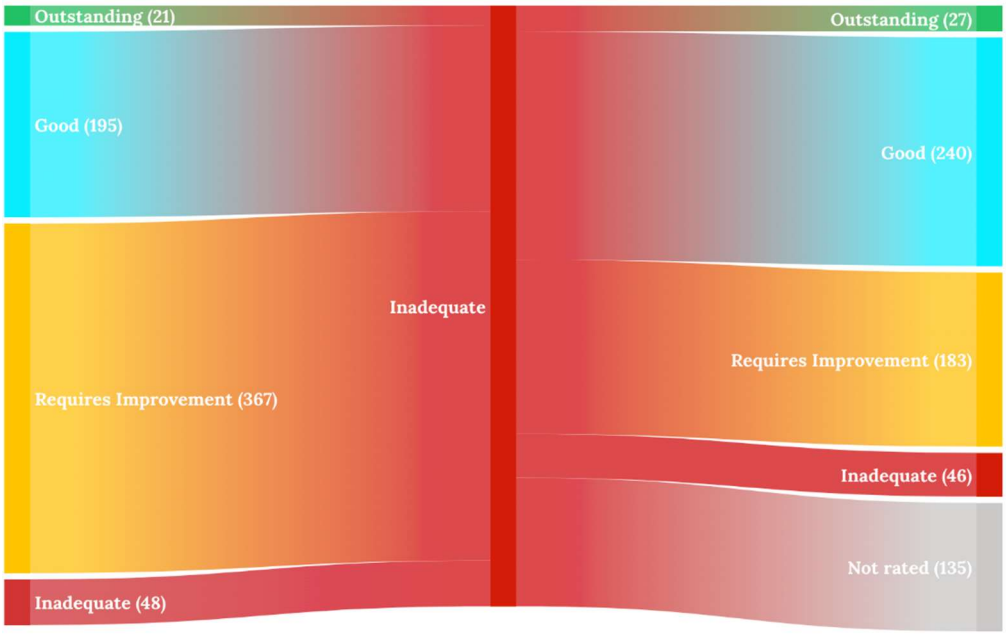
For example, United Learning - the country's largest multi academy trust - set out to create economies of scale and increase efficiency in "back office" services in order to reinvest savings into educational spend. In the last six years, United Learning has reduced its central non-educational costs by 18% in case terms and 29% in real terms.[62]

Academisation helped under-performing schools

Approximately two-thirds of sponsored academies were rated less than "Good" by Ofsted two inspections prior to their conversion,[63] according to a 2019 DfE report. Of those that were subsequently inspected as of 2019, 54% were rated Good or Outstanding, as shown by Figure 4.[64] By 2021, more than seven out of ten sponsored academies had a Good or Outstanding rating, compared to just one in ten of the local authority-maintained schools they replaced.[65]

Figure 4: Ofsted outcomes for inadequate schools that became sponsored academies before and after an inadequate outcome

Source: Sponsored Academies Research Report, Department of Education (2019)[66]



School improvement is even more pronounced within a MAT. DfE analysis compared annual cohorts of sponsored academies with similar local authority-maintained schools which were brought into a MAT.[67] The analysis showed that on average sponsored schools improve more quickly than maintained schools in a MAT.

It should also be noted that due to the academisation of underperforming schools, local authority-maintained school average performance improved,[68] since the struggling schools are removed from their data. This must be borne in mind when comparing academy and maintained school performance.

Areas where academies and MATs have been less successful

There is some evidence to suggest that single academy trusts, which are neither local authority maintained nor part of a MAT, can become isolated from supervision and expertise.[69] The strongest success stories of the academisation reforms have been within the context of MATs, especially in turning around

struggling schools.[70] At the same time, single academy trusts actually outperform MATs across a range of metrics, indicating the overall success of the model even outside a MAT context. This is due to the fact that MATs take on less highly achieving schools while SATs tend to be good schools to begin with, however.[71]

When MATs take on underperforming schools, this can be very effective but it can also be very costly.[72] The situation risks being made worse by the Government's withdrawal of Trust Capacity Funding, a competitive grant MATs could bid for to help them grow.[73] Some campaign groups, such as the Campaign for State Education, have argued that MATs sometimes have too many highly-paid school leaders and therefore spend excessive amounts on salaries.[74]

There has been regional variation in outcomes

Academisation has not benefitted all regions equally in terms of both availability and performance. First, academisation has occurred to a much greater extent in London and the South. In 2024, just 31% of schools in the North West were academies, compared to 63% of schools in the South West.[75] The South West also has the highest proportion of schools that are part of a large MAT of 20 or more schools: over a fifth of schools compared to just 3% in the North West.[76]

Part of the difficulty in ensuring that academisation occurs evenly across the country is sponsorship. The DfE considers that, where possible, sponsors should be located close to the schools they support because that allows easier sharing of resources and more efficient oversight.[77] However, there is considerable regional variation in the availability of potential sponsors located close to underperforming maintained schools that may convert to academies in future. In January 2018, 19% of sponsored academies in the West Midlands were more than 50 miles from their sponsor compared with 5% in the North West of London and South Central England.[78]

Second, the academies that are located in the regions are not as high performing on the whole. Of the top-50 performing academies in 2023-24, 30% were located in London and 14% in the South East, whilst only 2% were located in Yorkshire and the Humber and none in the North East.[79] The same regional disparities hold for MATs: at the highest-performing trust in London, 60% of disadvantaged pupils achieved both English and maths GCSE at grade 5 or above compared to 34% at the highest-performing trust in the South West.[80]

This regional disparity was recognised by Rachel Wolf, former policy adviser who worked on the government's academies programme, who said in 2020 that academies "*have not, at least yet, worked everywhere*".[81]

The establishment of Free Schools

Free schools were a new type of school that mimicked the Charter Schools model in the US. They enabled any individual, teacher, charity, university or business to set up a school, provided they could demonstrate demand from local parents. The aim was to increase parental choice, thereby increasing competition and driving up local standards.[82]

Free schools were introduced in the context of a school population boom in the 2000s, creating the need for around a quarter of a million new primary school places by 2014-15.[83] The free school model allowed pre-existing buildings to be converted into new schools at a lower cost.[84]

The creation of free schools aimed to reduce the gap in opportunity between disadvantaged children and poor privileged pupils by facilitating the creation of new free schools.[85] The objective was to create more of an internal market and more competition within the education system and to allow schools to be created where there is demand.

A 2023 report by the New Schools Network highlighted ten key aspects of a successful free school: a clear mission; buy-in from staff and pupils into the school culture; recruiting teachers who share the values; promoting from within; focus on staff training; attention to detail; a focus on the fundamentals of learning; consistency in the classroom; being publicly visible and a wider impact on the community.[86]

Free schools have outperformed other types of school since their creation. The share of free schools judged outstanding by Ofsted has been much higher than in other types of schools.[87] Free school pupils achieved the equivalent of a tenth of a grade higher in each subject at KS4 (including Years 7 to 11) compared to their peers in other schools, controlling for pupil and school-level characteristics.[88] Many of the strongest performing schools nationally are free schools, including Michaela and schools within Harris and Dixons.[89]

Box 4: Case study: Star Academies

Star Academies trust is an example of a school which has implemented these key learning points to great success. Star Academies' first free school – Tauheedul Boys (TIBHS) – opened in 2012 in a disused primary school building in Blackburn. It now occupies state-of-the-art premises, is a leader in digital innovation and has transformed the life chances of many young people. Since then, 18 free schools have joined the trust.[90] Fifteen of these schools held 'Outstanding' Ofsted judgements in 2023,[91] and TIBHS (a free school within the trust) was ranked as one of the top schools nationally for progress made by pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in 2024.[92]

A core part of its success was having a strong central vision. According to their Chief Executive, trustees '*formulated a shared, uncompromising vision that will sustain them through the difficult years of managing temporary sites*'.[93]

The trust also places a strong emphasis on recruiting staff based on their belief in the school's values, even where there are gaps in skills, and offer good opportunities for their staff to learn and develop. For example, at Eden Girls' School - a free school within the trust - development to address any gaps identified in the recruitment process starts on day one, and a comprehensive induction programme is designed to inform new staff of the school's culture, values and vision.[94]

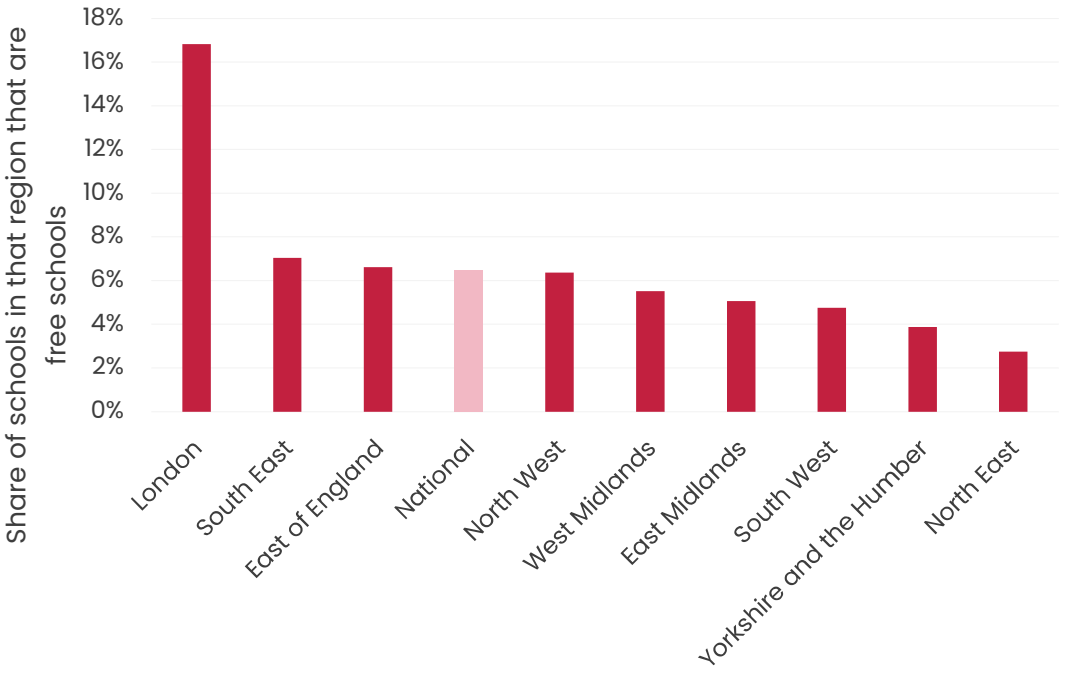
The trust also emphasises that their schools are outward-facing organisations. For example, children and staff volunteer at local charities, foodbanks and care homes.[95] In May 2023, Star schools completed 10,000 hours of voluntary service in their communities and hosted Star Big Lunch parties to strengthen their community bonds further.[96]

The trust collaborates with other schools to share best practice. For example, the trust operates three teaching school hubs in North West England. Its 'Star Institute' programme offers a range of school improvement support that includes assisting schools in developing school improvement plans and policies, addressing weaknesses identified by Ofsted and even providing acting headteachers in particularly challenging schools.[97] Star has also opened one of nine Attendance Hubs established nationally which supports around 60 secondary schools to tackle barriers to attendance.[98]

However, the establishment of free schools has also faced challenges. First, free schools have generally been concentrated in London and the South East, meaning their impact has not been system-wide: 17% of all schools in London are free schools, compared to just 4% in Yorkshire and the Humber.[99] Second, it is costly to set up a school, so there is a significant practical barrier to free school creation. There are also some examples of less successful schools suffering from poor financial management, which was noted by the Public Accounts Committee in 2014.[100]

Figure 5: Percentage of schools in each region that are free schools, February 2025

Source: Department for Education



Reforms to standards

The reforms to school standards were more varied than those to structures, but produced undeniable progress, particularly in reading and maths.

This report will focus on phonics and maths mastery, curriculum reform to GCSEs, A-levels and the EBacc, exams and accountability. By "standards", this report is referring to changes in teaching method and in the content of standard qualifications.

The reforms of the Conservative-led governments were largely designed to respond to the growth of progressive methods and ideology in teaching. An example of this is "inquiry-based" approaches to maths,[101] which emphasise problem-solving and group work over memorising formulas or foundational mathematical knowledge. Another is the "whole language" approach to reading,[102] which teaches via context and understanding rather than phonics and the mechanics of language. Such methods had become popular within the teaching profession but have poor evidence base and were leading to under-performance, as discussed below.

Background to standards reform

State of play in 2010 - Labour's successes and failures

Before 2010, the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown had made genuine attempts to improve education, but with mixed results. The most effective change was a renewed prioritisation of literacy and numeracy, with dedicated time introduced in primary schools. There was also a new focus on synthetic phonics for developing early reading skills, partly in response to pressure applied by what was then the shadow ministerial team for Education. However, at the time the Coalition came to power the decision on whether or not to use synthetic phonics was largely at the discretion of the individual school.[103]

Labour introduced a greater focus on accountability and results, especially for poorer performing pupils. But this also resulted in significant gaming of the system, with schools entering pupils onto less rigorous courses to increase the share of pupils getting five or more "good" GCSEs, given the equivalence between academic and vocational qualifications, as found by the Wolf Review 2011.[104]This represents a choice made by schools, but the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown repeatedly cited the inflated GCSE results as proof their education policies were working, despite international evidence to the contrary.[105]

Evidence of under-performance from 1997 onwards

From 1992 to 2016 the headline measure of school performance was the share of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at A*-C grade; in 2006 this was adjusted so that English and Maths had to be included.[106] The Labour Government reported in 2008 that since 1997 the share of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at A*-C grade had risen from 46% to 65%.[107]

However, when considering international comparisons and independent research there is evidence that standards actually declined.[108]

Between 2001 and 2006, England dropped from third place to 15th in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which internationally compares reading skills at age 10.[109] A 2014 report by the Institute for Education found that international studies like PISA, which compares reading skills at age 15-16, did not show corresponding gains, despite the Government's claims.[110]

In 2002 the Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre (CEM) at Durham University found in their own tests that between 1997 and 2002 there was no evidence of improvement in literacy and only meagre improvement in maths, despite significant rises in Key Stage 2 test scores.[111]

In 2004, the National Foundation for Educational Research found no improvement in standards despite rising Key Stage 2 scores. The NFER standardises the test scores for Key Stage 2 tests. If actual standards are rising, tests are re-standardised so that all the scores do not shift upwards. However, despite four years of raised Key Stage 2 test scores, by 2002 the NFER found no need to re-standardise. This indicates no genuine change in achievement.

Independent academics found in 2001 and 2003 that more than half the gains in literacy at Key Stage 2 between 1999 and 2002 were due to easier questions and that Key Stage 2 literary scores increased between 1998 and 2000 because reading tests had become easier.[112]

Focusing on the middle at the expense of high achievers

A major criticism of the New Labour approach was that it encouraged schools to focus on the D/C grade boundary at the expense of pupils capable of achieving higher grades. This was noted in a 2013 parliamentary debate by the Schools Minister, David Laws, in relation to the system the Coalition Government had inherited.[113] A 2020 Nuffield Trust report reviewing school performance measurement found that this practice was in fact occurring under Labour, as did a UCL study in 2021.[114] [115]

The national strategies introduced by Labour failed to support high achievers. From 2007 to 2008, the share of pupils reaching Level 5 fell in all three core subjects – 5% in English, 1% in maths and 3% in science. In all subjects, the percentages in 2008 are almost identical to those in 2004, attracting criticism that the national strategy did not cater for the brightest pupils.[116]

There was an increase in the number of pupils being entered for less challenging courses. More pupils were entered for the ICT General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ), where a pass was equivalent to four GCSEs for the purposes of league tables, but took around the same time as just one full GCSE.[117] The pass rate of the ICT GNVQ was 79% compared with 61% of GCSE entries achieving equivalent grades.[118]

Finally, the shift from O-levels to GCSEs in the late 1980s introduced greater modularisation. This allowed assessment to be broken up into separate modules, with schools able to re-enter pupils for the same exams repeatedly until a good result was achieved. In 2009 controlled assessments[119] were introduced, further encouraging modular assessment rather than end of year exams.[120]

Higher grades, lower standards

While the system of assessment and measurement that prevailed under Labour made schools and colleges look better, it produced poorer outcomes for pupils.[121]

The primary National Strategy introduced in 2003 prescribed certain content that all schools should teach. However, a report for Policy Exchange by Sam Freedman and Tom Richmond found this did not produce meaningful improvement in pupil attainment at Key Stage 2. In 2008, 19% of pupils still failed to reach the minimum standards for English at the end of primary school and 22% for maths.[122]

Explanations for this process of "grade inflation" include a reduction in testing standards during the period of reported progress under Labour, including a shift towards more lenient standards in English at Key Stage 2.[123]

The quality and standards of GCSEs fell during this period. For example, Ofqual's 2009 review found that revisions to GCSE science criteria had resulted in a lowering of quality in science assessments, with a shift towards "literacy" and "relevance" rather than knowledge.[124] The Royal Society of Science even petitioned the government over the erosion of rigorous standards in science teaching.

The approach to testing encouraged "teaching to the test", as found by the Statistics Commission.[125] It concluded that: "*The Commission believes that it has been established that the improvement in KS2 test scores …substantially overstates the improvement in standards in English primary schools*".[126]

Criticism of New Labour's approach to assessment

The content and assessment style that had been established under Labour was increasingly criticised. The work of educational researchers such as E.D. Hirsch and Daisy Christodoulou contributed to the wider acceptance of the importance of teaching knowledge rather than just skills,[127] in particular making the case that a foundational factual understanding of subject content is a prerequisite of subsequent critical analysis.

The review of the 2007 National Curriculum by Tim Oates confirmed that Labour's changes had resulted in an imprecise curriculum where subject knowledge was not properly assessed, and too much attention diverted towards "contexts" rather than facts. This led to unfavourable international comparisons.[128]

The challenges of eroded standards and suboptimal teaching methods facing the English school system were not unique. Finland was once the envy of the world for its education system, for example, but it has since slipped down the international league tables and experts have pointed to the rise of "progressive" teaching as the reason for this.[129]

Box 5: A knowledge over skills approach to teaching Modern Foreign Languages, Cobham Free School[130]

Cobham Free School, opened in 2012, educates almost 1,000 pupils. The school strongly believes that their knowledge-based approach is key to their academic success. They have consistently achieved over 90% in the phonics Year 1 screening check in recent years and results in Key Stage 1 and 2 SATS have been well above national average.[131] According to their Executive Head, '*our focus on a knowledge-rich curriculum has allowed pupils to make connections and identify links with topics beyond the classroom*'.[132]

The school's knowledge-based curriculum is demonstrated in its approach to Modern Foreign Language teaching:

- **Grammatical knowledge:** There is a strong emphasis on securing grammatical knowledge. A 'scaffolded' approach is adopted by teachers to present new grammatical concepts in a structured way which builds on prior student knowledge. For instance, selected verbs are taught in the 'present' tense until secure; the 'perfect' tense is then introduced to gradually increase the level of complexity.

- **Knowledge of vocabulary:** When teaching vocabulary, a three-stage questioning approach is used to allow for repetition and help students memorise the language. Regular vocabulary tests are planned into the curriculum to assess whether pupils have internalised words taught in a particular unit of study.
- **Teaching to embed key knowledge:** Specific co-operative learning techniques which have been proved to embed key knowledge are used, such as Kagan structures. Regular assessment is used to identify any gaps in knowledge. Teachers are encouraged to go back and re-teach a topic where it has not been grasped before moving on to new knowledge. Pupils are also given the opportunity to apply the knowledge they have acquired through French days and French theatre workshops.

Reforms to standards and curriculum post 2010

The Coalition Government from 2010 onwards implemented several reforms to teaching methods, assessment and the curriculum. The objective was to prioritise foundational skills, particularly in English and maths, to move towards more rigorous assessment, and to develop a more knowledge-rich curriculum with higher standards. This reflected a growing body of academic opinion emphasising the importance of foundational knowledge as a precursor to building understanding, analysis and skills.[133]

Phonics and Maths Mastery in primary schools

A major reform to the teaching of foundational reading skills introduced under the Coalition Government was the implementation of phonics testing via the Phonics Screening Check. The check was made mandatory in 2012 at the end of Year 1 and sought to ensure that no child could fall through the cracks due to teachers failing to realise they could not read.

This was particularly necessary after New Labour's 'National Literacy Strategy (NLS), a set of teaching frameworks and guidance to improve literacy standards in primary schools, proved to do little to improve reading performance.[134] [135] The NLS was not compulsory, but there was a clear expectation placed on schools to adopt it. The principle was that schools should opt-out rather than opt-in.[136] However, the NLS did not result in significantly better literacy standards: only 56% of boys and 66% of girls leaving primary school in 2008 could read, write and count to the required standard.[137]

The strategy was criticised for encouraging the "searchlight" method of teaching phonics.[138] This encouraged children to "work out" a new word either from the context, the sentence structure, by sounding out the word or by visually recognising the shape of the word, rather than through building a strong basis in phonics and grammar first. This approach was widely condemned by education experts. Dr Morag Stuart from the Institute of Education in London said, "*the model of reading…is completely and utterly misleading*" and Sue Lloyd, co-author of the "Jolly Phonics" teaching programme, said that the method had done nothing to prevent serious reading failure.[139]

The existence of a new test made phonics a classroom priority for teachers. Accredited phonics programmes were embedded into academy funding agreements and phonics was standardised in Initial Teaching Training.

From 2016 the DfE rolled out Maths Mastery programmes, drawing on evidence from other countries' systems, particularly Singapore.[140] The "mastery" approach involves teaching a whole class at once and not moving on from a concept until everyone in the class understands it fully.[141] This is crucial as maths is built upon layers of knowledge and understanding, and without full mastery of earlier or prior concepts it is usually impossible to move on. A review of current educational academic research conducted by Ofsted in 2021 clearly highlights that mathematical concepts need to be acquired systemically, and that careful sequencing of content is important if children are to succeed.[142]

The introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc)

The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) was introduced in 2010. This was a new accountability measure introduced to track the share of pupils entering EBacc-designated subjects (English Language and Literature, Maths, three Science subjects, Geography, a modern foreign language) and whether they attained five good GCSEs.

It was thought that taking a wider range of rigorous GCSE subjects would give students more options post-16. There was a particular concern that schools were discouraging students from taking these subjects to increase their performance in league tables, despite the fact that this limited their progression both on to the next level of study and employment.[143]

This was highlighted as a problem in the Wolf Review.[144] The report found that, from 2006 to the year before publication in 2010, the share of GCSEs which were represented by vocational qualifications[145] grew from 4.8% to 11.7%[146].

Though the review recognised that vocational education can set students up well in the labour market, many students were not following vocational courses of this type: at least 350,000 taking vocational courses at GCSE got little to no benefit from the post-16 education system afterwards.[147] At the same time, taking a broader range of rigorous subjects have been proven to aid employment. When comparing two students who had taken subjects across one or two subject groups, individuals who had studied a broader curriculum at GCSE typically earned 3-4% more.[148]

The EBacc was particularly aimed at helping disadvantaged children who may be less likely to benefit from parental or school encouragement to take "hard" subjects. This trend was noted by a 2016 report for the Sutton Trust,[149] the 2011 Wolf Review of vocational education[150] and the UCL Institute of Education.[151] At the time Nick Gibb said: "*These are the subjects that more affluent families will expect their children to study because they give young people the greatest opportunities and options for their future. If it's right for these children, it's right for all children regardless of their background.*"[152] The argument follows that taking the EBacc could aid social mobility by helping disadvantaged students progress into further education.[153] While it was not mandatory, it provided an incentive for schools to promote uptake of more rigorous subjects.

The new National Curriculum

The Coalition Government introduced a new National Curriculum, beginning with a review in 2010, aiming to make the content taught to pupils in England more rigorous, with earlier teaching of foundational knowledge.

The 2010 review led to a new Curriculum being published in 2014 and a primary national curriculum being published in 2013. The new Curriculum slimmed down the content to be taught in many cases, but increased it in English and Maths, and in some subjects insisted that content be taught earlier than previously.[154] The new curriculum was significantly slimmed down to reduce overloading and allow more flexibility for teachers and school leaders to design curricula appropriate for their pupils.[155]

One of the reforms introduced in the new curriculum was to make foreign languages mandatory at Key Stage 2.[156] The Government consultation on curriculum reform found strong international evidence that language learning enhances cognitive development and cultural awareness, and that high-performing jurisdictions like Hong Kong emphasised early introduction to languages.[157] For example, a study conducted between 2010 and 2018 across

multiple schools in northern Germany found that introducing foreign language teaching earlier (in Year 1) with an earlier start performed significantly better in Years 5 and 9 than those who began learning in Year 3, regardless of other factors such as gender, cognitive abilities, and cultural capital.[158]

The new curriculum also emphasised the discrete disciplines of biology, chemistry and physics, which was strongly supported by scientific bodies such as the Wellcome Trust, rather than the trend towards teaching science as one or two combined subjects.[159]

Reforms to GCSEs and A-Level testing

From 2015, the Conservative Government reformed GCSEs and A-levels with the intention of making them more rigorous. This involved removing modularisation and the culture of re-sits,[160] seeking to align English qualifications with international examinations and better to prepare students for university.

GCSEs were also migrated to a 1-9 grade structure to increase differentiation of high achievers, and assessment was reformed to a predominantly exam-based format at the end of the two-year period for GCSE and A-Levels respectively. This was to achieve several objectives.

It aimed to increase teaching time by clawing back what had become revision periods, allocated coursework time and study breaks. It also sought to encourage deeper learning, with revision of older content and promotion of linkages between topics rather than learning in siloed modules.

Moving towards a more exam-heavy approach to assessment was also designed to help more disadvantaged pupils; anonymous exams remove any element of bias on the part of teachers and eliminate the element of greater parental assistance that can occur with coursework.[161]Headteachers also reported that assessment by exam gave a boost to disadvantaged pupils because it was easier to ensure they attended for the short exam period even if their wider continuous attendance was poor.[162]

Curriculum reform also prioritised high knowledge standards rather than less rigorous concepts like “scientific literacy”, which prioritised general scientific thinking and skills, and the application of science to everyday life.[163] It mandated the teaching of English literature from Britain rather than the United States or Commonwealth.[164]

Phonics and Maths Mastery transformed reading and numeracy

These changes are arguably the most consequential of the Conservatives' reforms. 81% of schools in England were delivering phonics instruction following government guidelines by 2013.[165] Only 3% of teachers were not convinced of the value of this model of teaching.[166]

In 2012, 58% of pupils nationally reached the expected standard, rising to 74% in 2014. This meant 102,000 more 6 year-old children were reading better.[167] Achieving this standard is a strong predictor of a pupil's later Key Stage 1 performance; 99% of pupils who achieved the standard achieved a level 2 or above in reading.[168] Attainment in reading has also improved for disadvantaged pupils, with 82% achieving level 4 at Key Stage 2 in 2014 compared to 73% in 2011.[169]

The PIRLS 2021 evaluation found that the strongest predictor of PIRLS performance was the Year 1 phonics check mark, for which a 1-point increase was associated with a nearly 4-point gain in PIRLS 2021 overall reading performance. This was a stronger predictor than the number of books a child had at home or eligibility for free school meals (FSM)."[170]

Ofsted's 2023 Maths subject report found a "resoundingly positive" shift in Maths at primary level and "notable" improvements in secondary teaching.[171] In PISA, in 2023 England reached 11th in the world in maths, up from 18th in 2018 and 27th in 2009.[172] And a recent UCL study even found that state school pupils now perform better in core subjects (English, Maths and Science) than private school pupils once demographic factors have been accounted for.[173]

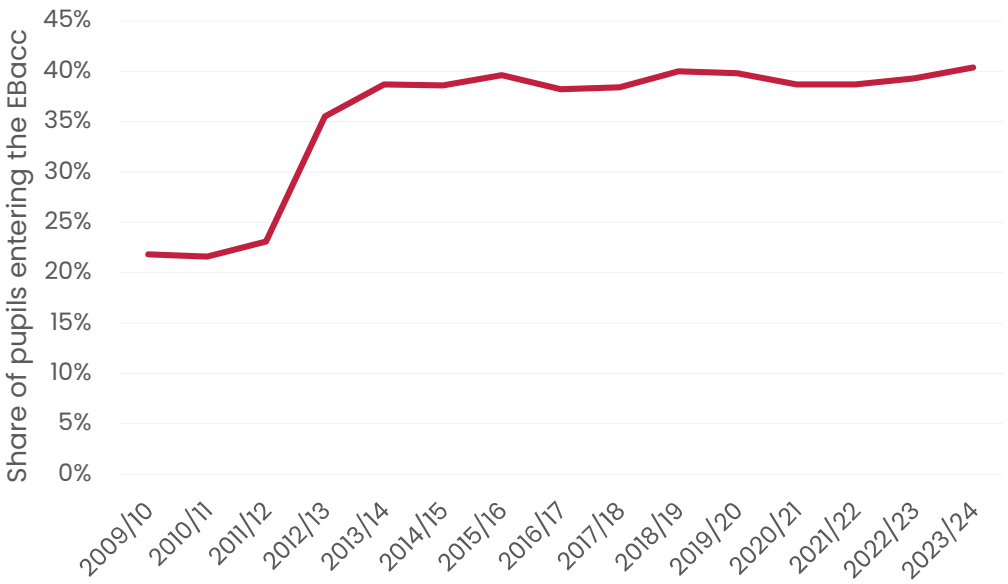
There have been challenges around implementing phonics and maths mastery. A DfE focus group from 2014 found there was need for additional training to deliver the new phonics model,[174] and a 2023 survey found that 43% of trainee teachers had poor maths skills.[175]

The EBacc has increased uptake of rigorous subjects, but its success has plateaued

The rate of pupils being entered into EBACC subjects, which are generally better respected and more rigorous, increased to around 40% from only 22%.[176] The EBacc has also made a difference to the GCSEs taken by disadvantaged students: the number of pupils entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) entering the EBacc was around 30% by 2020, though this is still significantly lower than non-FSM students.[177]

Figure 6: Share of pupils entering English Baccalaureate (EBACC) subjects, 2009-10 - 2023-24

Source: Department for Education



There has been a significant shift towards participation in EBacc GCSE subjects. The share of all GCSE entries that were EBacc subjects rose during the five years from 2017 to 2021, from 76% to over four fifths (85%).[178]

There is some evidence that the EBacc achieved its aim of improving social mobility by improving progression rates into post-16 education.[179] Although many factors influence this, a 2018 study from the UCL Institute for Education found that, even when controlling for student prior attainment and socioeconomic factors, pupils who had taken EBacc subjects at GCSE were statistically more likely to stay on at school.[180] Teacher surveys conducted by the DfE also show that, in teacher's experience, the EBacc helps students to make the step into employment and further education. One respondent said the EBacc encouraged pupils to "*be more career focused earlier on…I think that is a positive of the EBacc.*"[181]

Experts have also noted that the EBacc encourages disadvantaged students into higher education. In a speech in 2016, Sir Michael Wilshaw, the former Chief Inspector of Schools, argued that "*the EBacc is a powerful tool for social mobility, ensuring that all children have access to the core academic subjects that will open doors in later life.*"[182] In 2018, Russell Hobby, former General Secretary of the

National Association of Head Teachers, similarly argued "*whatever your opinions towards the EBacc, there is no denying that the subjects within it are highly valued by top universities*".[183]

Limitations of the EBacc

The introduction of the EBacc has not gone without criticism. While the increase in EBacc uptake has been large, it remains a long way from the 90% uptake by 2025 target the DfE originally set.[184]

There are multiple reasons for this. First, many schools are almost able to provide the EBacc, but cannot recruit teachers in one or two subjects, particularly languages.[185] In 2018, the vast majority of pupils that failed to meet the EBacc's subject criteria (84%) had not enrolled for a language GCSE.[186] Given the rigour of the EBacc, many schools choose to not offer the options to their less able students.[187]

Though more disadvantaged pupils are taking rigorous GCSE subjects than before, the gap between their peers has not fully closed. Entries for the full EBacc among students entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) rose from 10% in 2011 to 30% by the end of the decade, but this was still significantly lower than non-FSM students where the rate was around 45%.[188] FSM pupils are also less likely to achieve the EBacc: in 2014, the percentage of pupils who entered but did not achieve the EBacc was 57% for FSM students, but 37% for non-FSM pupils.[189] However, while the uptake and success rate may be lower for disadvantaged pupils, the EBacc has achieved its aims of encouraging participation in more rigorous subjects for this group. Some schools serving very disadvantaged communities have seen major successes - 74% of pupils taking GCSEs at King Solomon Academy in Paddington in 2015 were disadvantaged, yet 80% entered the EBacc and 76% achieved it, for example.[190]

Another criticism of the EBacc is that it has crowded out other subjects. As more emphasis has been placed on more “rigorous” subjects over less academic courses, there has been a large drop in entries for non-vocational but non-EBacc subjects such as art and drama.[191] Entrance in GCSE Design and Technology more than halved between 2009-10 and 2019-20.[192]

This is partly because schools are heavily reweighting their resources towards more traditional academic subjects. The share of teachers employed in EBacc subjects rose from 61% in 2015-16 to 66.2% in 2020-21, accompanied by a 12.2% increase in the share of teaching hours allocated to these subjects between 2011-12 and 2020-21. Conversely, the share of teaching hours allocated to Design Technology, Drama and Art have fallen by 52%, 20% and 10% in the same period.[193]

Critics question whether it is a good thing that participation in artistic subjects is falling. The Russell Group - which devised the list of EBacc subjects- ditched its list of "facilitating subjects" amid concerns that too many pupils felt they had to study only academic subjects to get into university.[194] While there has been an increase in uptake in "hard" subjects, this has come at the cost of a more holistic curriculum as fewer pupils are now taking creative subjects.

Despite these concerns, there is no doubt that the EBacc has encouraged greater participation in "core" GCSE subjects and kept schools more accountable to encouraging students to make more career-focused choices, while discouraging schools from enrolling pupils onto "easier" courses.

GCSE and A-level testing - early responses

New GCSEs and A-Levels are hard to evaluate given how recently they were rolled out, with further disruptions to measurable data caused by pandemic-induced school closures. However, there has been praise for reformed GCSE Maths,[195] with most teachers saying it has resulted in pupils beginning A-level Maths better prepared.[196] A 2019 Ofqual survey of 500 teachers about the changes found that many believed the new GCSE better prepared their students for A-levels.[197]

There is some concern that the new GCSEs are too demanding for lower attaining pupils. Some stakeholders have described the number of exams pupils are now expected to sit as excessive. A report by the exam board OCR in 2024 argued that the volume and intensity of exams at GCSE is too high.[198] There is some evidence that this may be contributing to exam-related anxiety.[199] Pepe Di'Iasio, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, has argued that the end-of-course exam model is too high stakes, and that it would be possible to reform this element while preserving the integrity of examinations.[200]

However, there is significant evidence in favour of a more terminal assessment approach. In 2013 Ofqual raised questions about the reliability of controlled assessments and the consistency of teacher assessment in particular.[201] The 2011 review of the National Curriculum favoured moving towards more linear assessment, also citing assessment reliability with coursework and controlled assessments.[202] The Education Select Committee received evidence from multiple academics in 2012 that linear, terminal assessment better prepared students for higher education than a modular approach.[203]

Educational performance in England since 2010

Higher levels of pupil attainment is the greatest proof of the success of the 2010 reforms to education in England. There have been measurable and system-wide improvements to the school system. These include:

- Higher standards as measured by phonics and multiplication tests at Key Stage 1
- A higher share of pupils attaining the expected standard in reading, writing and maths at Key Stages 2 and 4
- A fall in the disadvantage gap for Key Stages 2 and 4
- A rise in the share of schools being rated Good or Outstanding; and
- Highly significant improvements in the ranking of English schools in international league tables.

While no one metric provides comprehensive proof that the school reform programme caused these improvements, the overall picture on attainment data, disadvantage and international performance together presents a powerful story of improvement.

School attainment data - longitudinal analysis

Pupils are performing better in schools by many measures since the introduction of the education reforms in 2010. These measures include meeting the expected standard in phonics; the disadvantage gap; the share of schools being ranked Good or Outstanding by Ofsted; and the performance of English schools in international rankings.

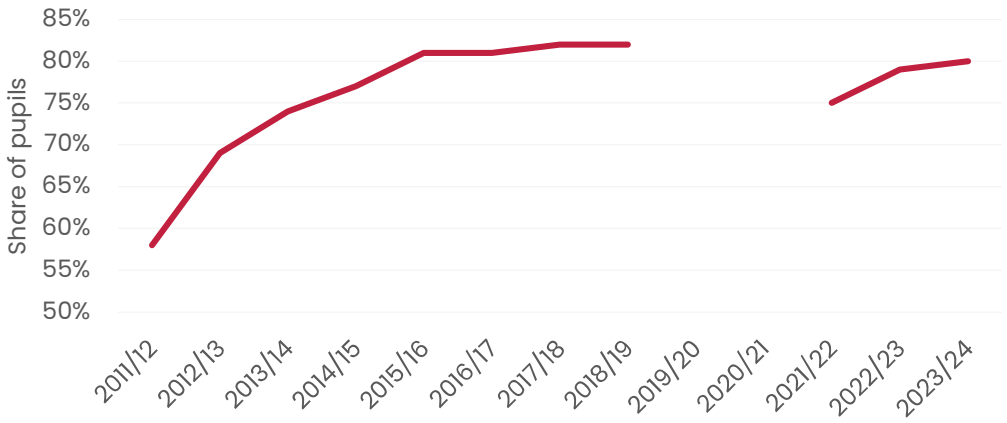
Phonics and multiplication checks improved foundational reading and maths

The percentage of pupils meeting the expected standard in the KS1 phonics screening check rose from less than 60% in 2011-12 to nearly 80% by 2022-23 - an increase of over 155,000 pupils.[204] The check measures the ability to identify the sounds letters and letter combinations make and is an effective method for teaching basic reading skills.[205]

While attainment fell back post-Covid, it rose in the following two years and remains far above its 2011-12 level.

Figure 7: Share of pupils meeting the expected standard in the phonics screening check in year 1

Source: DfE education statistics, Phonics screening check attainment

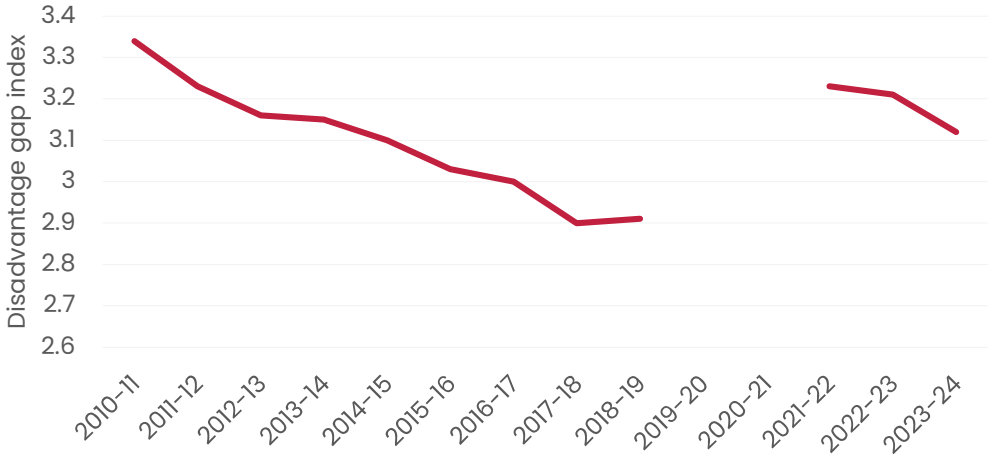


At KS2: Disadvantage gap

The gap between disadvantaged pupils and pupils in general fell during the period of Conservative-led reform. The disadvantage gap index, which measures the gap in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and all other pupils in English and Maths, fell significantly for Key Stage 2 between 2010-11 and 2018-19.[206] The disadvantage gap rose significantly after the period of school closures from 2020-201, but has fallen steadily since the data recommenced post-pandemic.

Figure 8: Disadvantage gap index at KS2, 2011-24

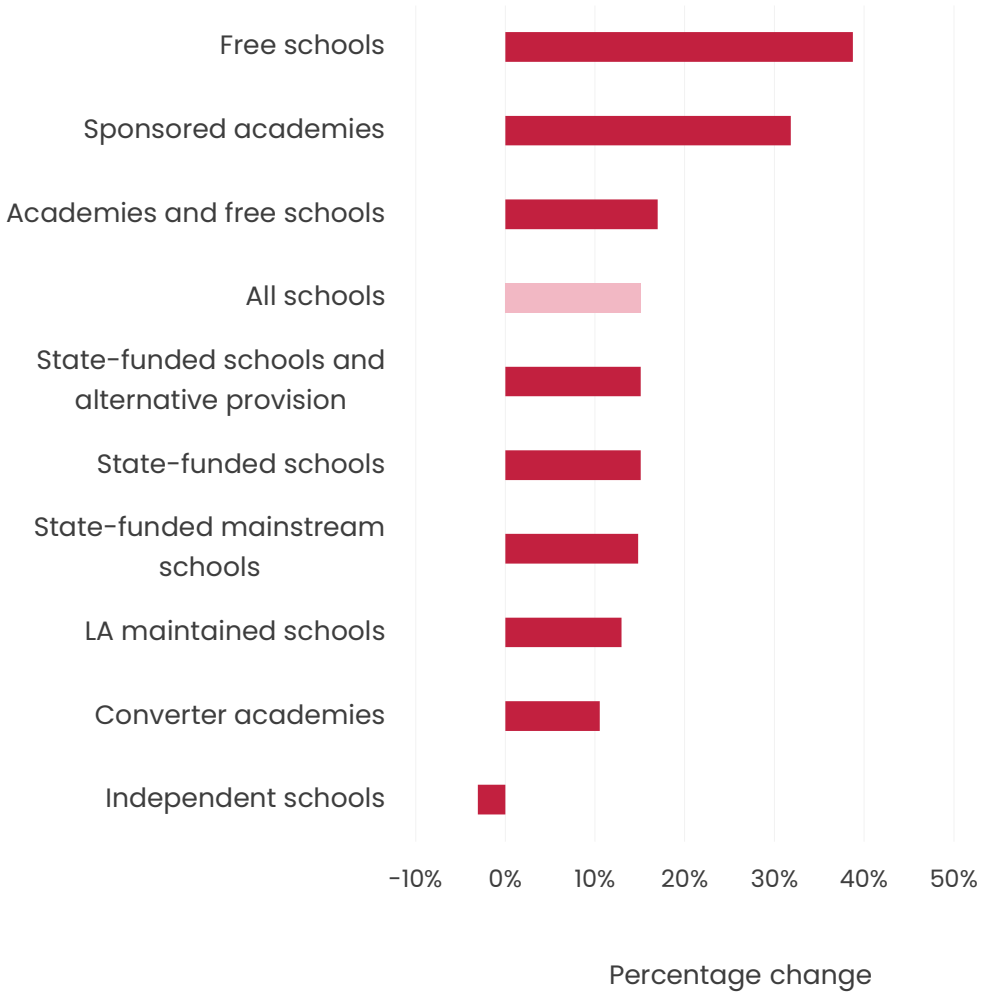
Source: DfE Education statistics



Pupil attainment at Key Stage 2 rose from 2015-16 - the first year for which comparable data is available[207] - with free schools and sponsored academies showing the most dramatic improvements. The share of Key Stage 2 pupils achieving the expected standard[208] rose for all school types between 2015-16 and 2023-24, from 53% to 61%.[209] Free schools and sponsored academies saw a steeper increase in the share of pupils attaining this standard than other types of school.[210]

Figure 9: Percentage change in the share of KS2 pupils achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, England, by type of school, 2016-24

Source: DfE education statistics, Attainment by school characteristics

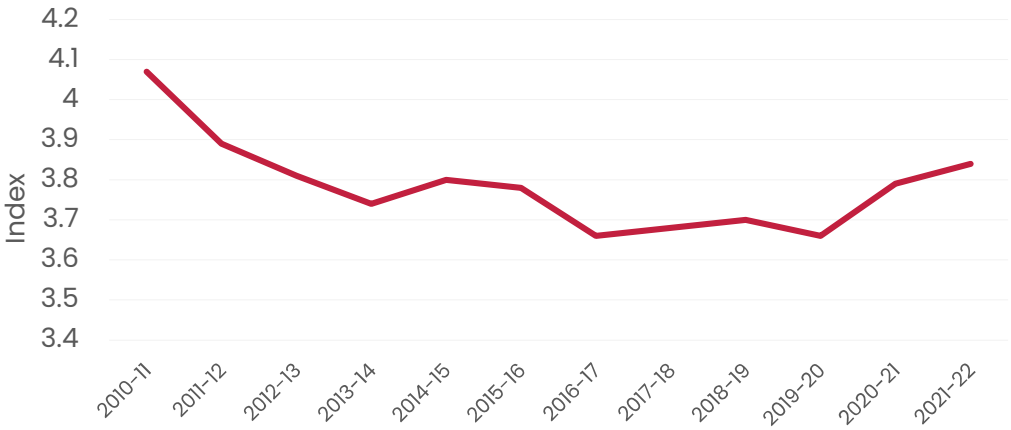


The disadvantage gap fell at Key Stage 4

The disadvantage gap index for Key Stage 4 pupils also fell steadily from 2010-11, reaching a record low of 3.66 in 2016-17 before climbing steadily from 2020-21 onwards,[211] most likely due to the impact of pandemic-era school closures.

Figure 10: Disadvantage gap index, KS4, 2010/11 - 2021/22

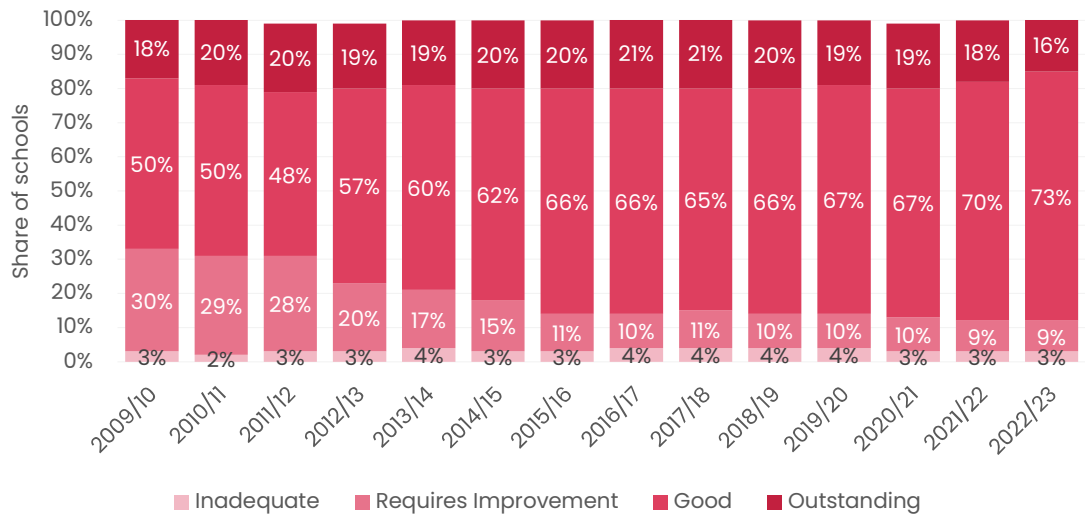
Source: DfE education statistics[212]



The has been a large improvement in the share of schools being assessed as Good or Outstanding by Ofsted, rising from 68% in 2009-10 to 89% in 2022-3.

Figure 11: Ofsted inspection rankings, 2009-10 to 2022-23

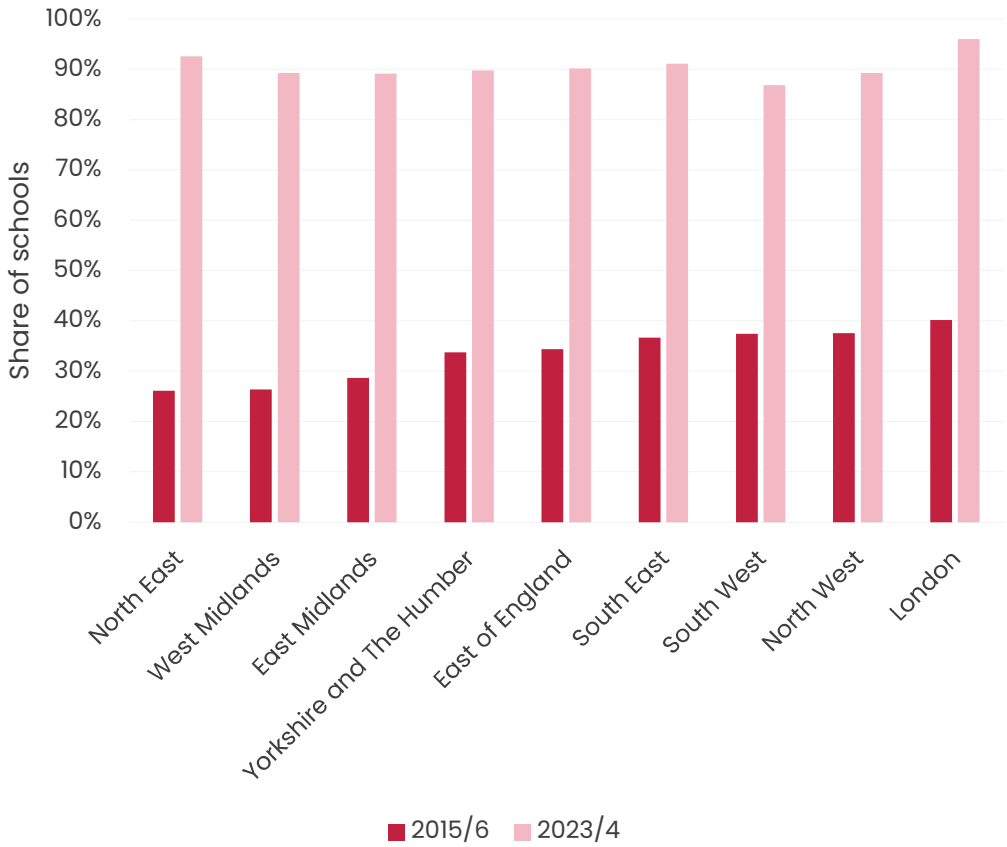
Source: Education Policy Institute analysis, 2018/19 - 2022/23



The share of schools being rated Good or Outstanding rose significantly between 2015-16 and 2023-24 across all English regions. London has had the highest share of Good or Outstanding schools since 2015, when it was just 40%, but in 2024 rose to 96%. And the North East, which previously had the lowest share of Good or Outstanding Schools (26%) increased its share to over 92%.

Figure 12: Percentage of Good or Outstanding Ofsted rated schools, by region, 2015/6 versus 2023/4

Source: Ofsted Inspection Data, 2015-16 and 2023-24



Free schools outperform other schools at KS2 and KS4

In 2023-24 68% of pupils attending free schools met the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, compared to a national state school average of 61%.[213] More than half achieved Grade 5 or above in English and maths at GCSE compared to a 46% national average for all state-funded schools in 2023-4.[214]

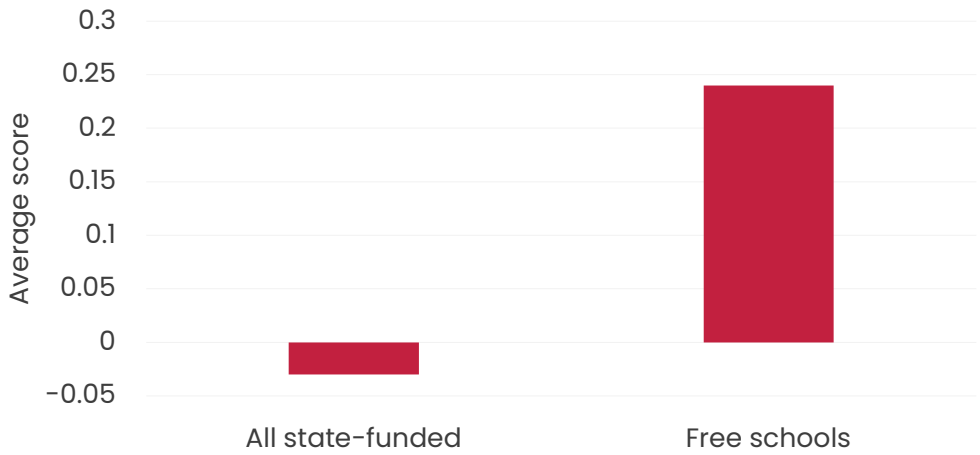
And free schools significantly outperform other schools on Progress 8 scores, which measure pupil progress in secondary education by comparing their attainment at the end of primary school with their performance at GCSE[215]: the average Progress 8 score was 0.24 in free schools compared to a -0.03 national average in 2023-4.[216]

Figure 13: Headline KS2 and KS4 performance metrics, by free school status, 2023-24

Source: Department for Education

Figure 14: Average Progress 8 scores, by free school status, 2023/4

Source: Department for Education



International evidence

Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA)[217]

In the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) the UK has pulled ahead of the OECD average[218] (international rankings are recorded on a UK-wide basis). England now significantly outperforms Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the OECD average in PISA scores for Maths, Reading and Science, indicating that schools in England are the major driving force behind this rank improvement.[219]

Pupils in Wales, even when controlling for socioeconomic background, are performing only as well as disadvantaged children in England. Pupils in areas of England with higher or similar levels of deprivation such as Liverpool or Gateshead achieve significantly higher GCSE results than their counterparts in Wales.[220]

It should be noted that PISA scores have decreased in the years following the Covid pandemic, but England continues to outperform the other home nations and the OECD average in PISA scores.[221]

Figure 15: Mathematics PISA scores by nation

Source: PISA 2022, 2009 and 2006 National Reports

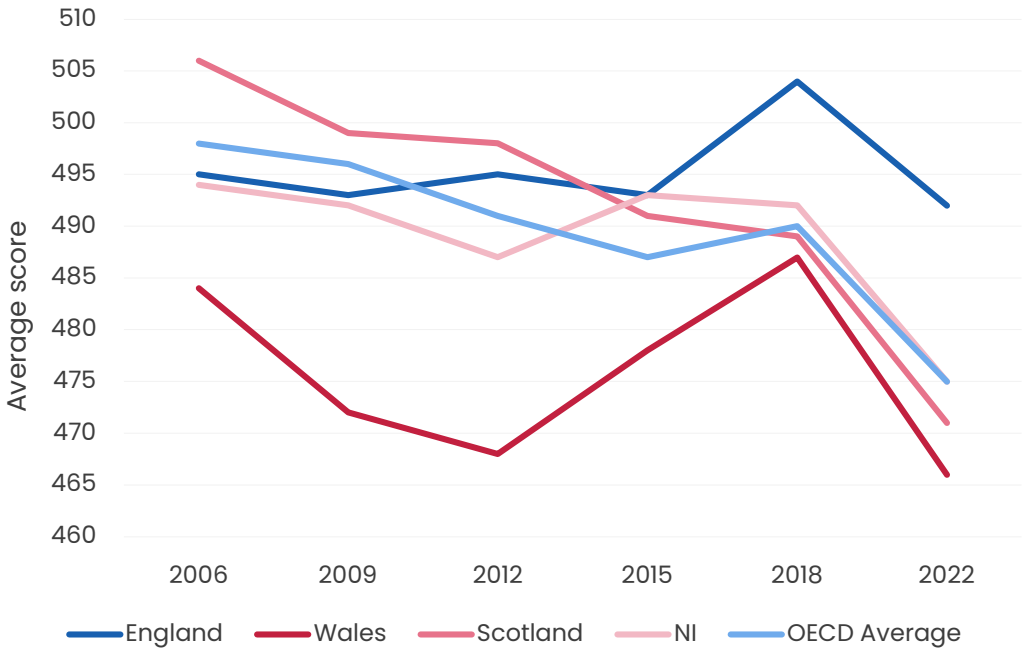


Figure 16: Reading PISA scores by nation

Source: PISA 2022, 2009 and 2006 National Report

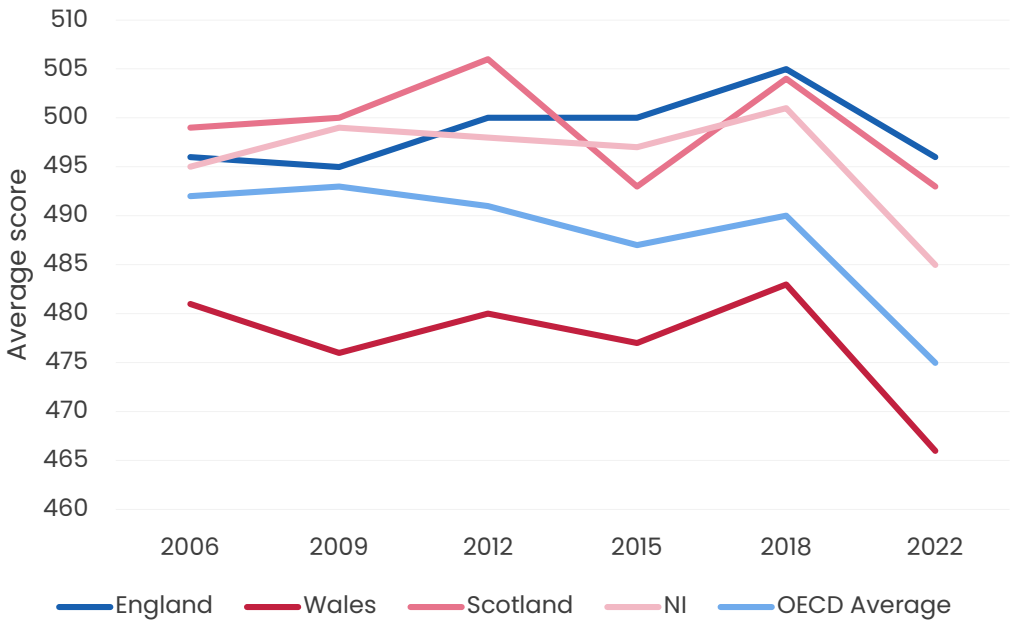
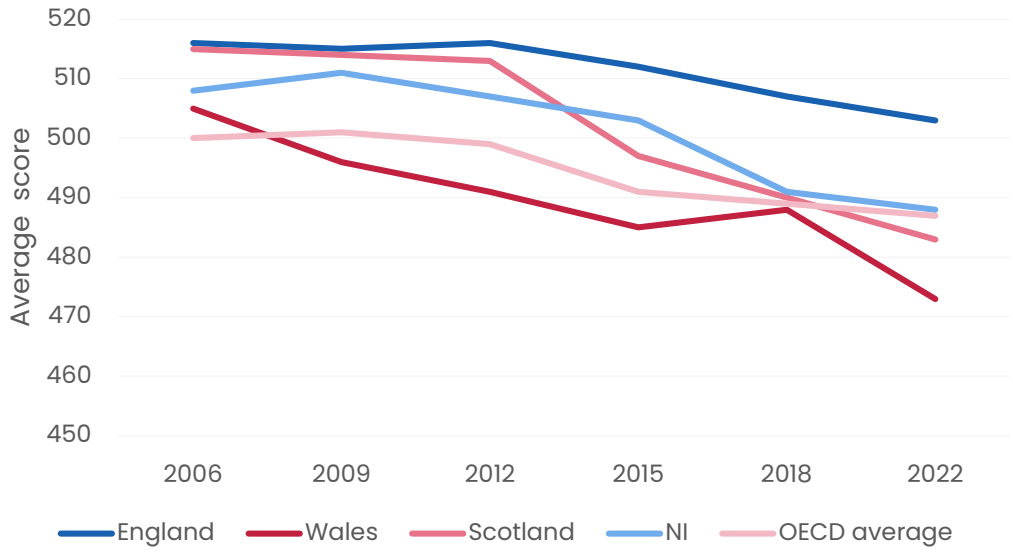


Figure 17: Science PISA scores by nation

Source: PISA 2022, 2009 and 2006 National Reports



England has risen up the rankings in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)

This major international literacy study ranks England as fourth best in the world, up from rank ten in 2016. In absolute terms the score has fallen by one point, in line with a shared international decline following the global pandemic. However, England's relative performance has been remarkably resilient compared to other OECD countries post-Covid.

Table 1: country rankings (top 15) and mean PIRLS scores, 2016 and 2022
Source: PIRLS Achievement Results 2022 and 2016

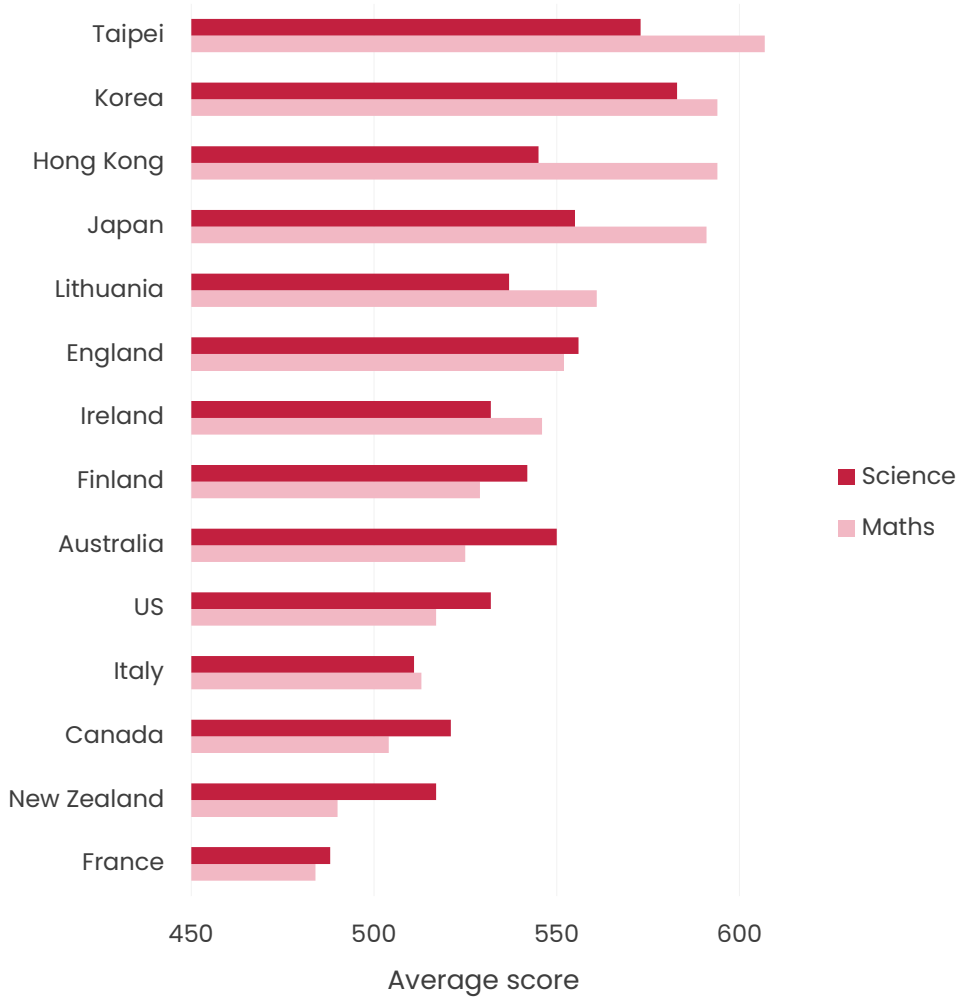
2016		2022	
Country Rank	**Mean Score**	**Country Rank**	**Mean Score**
Russian Federation	581	Singapore	587
Singapore	576	Hong Kong SAR	573
Hong Kong SAR	569	Russian Federation	567
Ireland	567	England	558
Finland	566	Finland	549
Poland	565	Poland	549
Northern Ireland	565	Chinese Taipei	544
Norway	559	Sweden	544
Chinese Taipei	559	Australia	540
England	559	Bulgaria	540
Latvia	558	Czech Republic	540
Sweden	555	Denmark	539
Hungary	554	Norway	539
Bulgaria	552	Italy	537
United States	549	Macao SAR	536

England has risen up the rankings for maths and science - Trends in International Maths and Science Survey (TIMMS)

English schools have risen significantly up international rankings for maths and science. Year 5 and 9 students in England now rank among the global top five for science in the TIMMS survey, overtaking competitive nations like Japan and Hong Kong - up from rank 12 in 2019 for Year 5 students and rank 14 for Year 9.[222]

Figure 19: Average TIMMS scores, Year 5 mathematics and science, 2023, England and comparator countries

Source: IEA TIMSS 2023 National Report



What challenges remain?

Successes of the Conservative-led reforms

Schools reform in England was successful because it took certain principles and applied them to the structures and standards of education. These include school freedom, giving power back to teachers, ending the monopoly of local authorities, making space for competition and innovation, allowing schools to tailor themselves to their communities, and a relentless focus on academic rigour.

System strengths

There have been considerable and measurable advancements in English schools' attainment metrics over the last 14 years because of these principles. England now has an established system of MATs and a process for establishing new schools where there is demand in the form of free schools. It also now has new methods of teaching and testing, more rigorous standards and a more knowledge-focused curriculum. It has concrete examples of innovation, exceptional school leadership and trailblazers of higher educational standards.

Examples of the innovation school freedom enabled include:

- **Ark Academy:** Maths Mastery, now praised as the key technique which has turned around maths teaching in England, was invented by Ark Academy.[223] Their curriculum and lesson resources are now used in schools up and down the country, subsidised by the DfE.

Box 6: Ark Academy Approach to Maths Mastery

ARK is a charity founded in 2002 by a group of hedge fund managers who aimed to pool their skills and resources to improve the life chances of children.[224] ARK Academies were strongly praised by the Coalition government for "*driving up standards in the poorest areas*".[225] A significant contributing element to the success of ARK schools is innovations with teaching methods and curriculum, which in turn has made a huge impact on the sector as a whole.

The freedoms afforded to them by the academy structure allowed ARK to devise the *Mathematics Mastery* programme. The approach was based on a curriculum in Singapore which emphasized problem solving and deep understanding of mathematical concepts. ARK used these principles but adapted the curriculum for learning in English schools.

The approach has been shown to improve attainment. A 2019 report by the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (NCETM) surveyed eight schools that had implemented the Maths Mastery approach and found that there has been improvement in the attainment for KS1 and KS2 students, with teachers reported that students clearly have a more fundamental understanding of key concepts.[226] Similarly, Oxford University conducted a Randomised Control Trial and found that Year 1 pupils taught with a Maths Mastery programme for two terms made significantly more progress than students using it for a shorter period.[227]

AR's innovation has benefitted the whole education sector: the trust partnered with the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (NCETM) and the Education Endowment Fund to share their best practice with the sector.

- **Oak Academy** is now an arm's length body that provides high quality, free curriculum materials to teachers across the country, reducing workload for teachers. It was originally set up by MAT CEOs and headteachers during the Covid pandemic. A number of MATs came together to put their learning resources into a central hub so that teachers could use them while schools were closed.
- **Reach Academy Trust** pioneered a community-based model through co-locating all phases of schools in one locality, from nurseries all the way through to sixth forms. This enables them to better tap into communities and build relationships with the families they serve. In turn this is crucial to managing challenges like behaviour and attendance.[228]
- **The Eton - Star Academy free school partnership**, paired one of the most successful private schools in the UK with one of the leading academy trusts - Star Academy - to reimagine options for young people post-16 and be academically ambitious for their pupils.[229] This partnership is now at risk due to Labour reviewing the funding for the free schools.[230]

The impact of Labour's Schools Bill

There are various changes in the Government's proposed Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill which stand to reverse major aspects of the academisation process. There is a risk that the process of increasing school choice and school freedom will go into reverse, endangering the progress that has been made on school standards and pupil outcomes as a result of academies and free schools.

The end of the Academisation Order

One of the most important proposed changes is ending the automatic conversion of failing schools into academies, as provided for in Section 44 of the Bill.[231] Instead, the Secretary of State will have discretion over how to handle the failing school. There is a risk that the ending of automatic academisation will result in prolonged legal challenges. In oral evidence before the Bill Committee, the Children's Commissioner said: "*I am deeply concerned that we are legislating against the things we know work in schools, and that we risk children spending longer in failing schools by slowing down the pace of school improvement.*"[232]

The former National Schools Commissioner, Sir David Carter, has warned that "*[the] arguments and legal actions that will arise if a school in Cumbria is told to join a trust while a school in Cornwall just gets arm's length support will only add delay to delivering a fairer and better offer to children.*"[233] He noted that: "*The academy trust movement has been a success story. Not everywhere, admittedly, but in many more locations than we have ever seen before in my 40-year career.*"[234]

Mandatory National Curriculum

The Bill proposes that all academies will have to follow the full National Curriculum, removing the freedom of academies to tailor their curriculum to their pupils and community and bringing academies into line with maintained schools.

Sir Dan Moynihan, Chief Executive of the Harris Federation of academies, told the Bill Committee: "*It is not clear to me why we would need to follow the full national curriculum. What advantage does that give? When we have to provide all the nationally recognised qualifications — GCSEs, A-levels, Sats — and we are subject to external regulation by Ofsted, why take away the flexibility to do what is needed locally?*"[235]

The mandatory National Curriculum will remove freedoms over curriculum content and focus, which risks removing the flexibility academies have to innovate and tailor content to their communities. The approaches taken by Michaela Community School in London, which takes a highly disciplinarian and traditional approach to teaching and learning, and School 21 in Stratford, which prioritises oracy (speaking skills) as central to its teaching model could be made impossible by the new requirements.

Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) Requirement

This provision will remove the freedom of academies to employ teachers without QTS or not actively seeking it. This is designed to ensure that all teachers at state schools in England are "qualified" in the sense of holding a formal teaching qualification but will provide a barrier to entry for potential teachers who do not wish immediately to pursue QTS.

Steve Chalk, Founder of Oasis Academy Trust, has raised concerns about this requirement, suggesting that candidates such as university lecturers or good candidates from overseas could be deterred by the extra barrier to entry.[236]

Ending the academies presumption

Clause 51 of the Bill provides that local authorities will regain the power to make decisions over the opening of new schools. The default position for new schools will be maintained status rather than academy status.

Former Ofsted chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw has expressed concern about ending the academies presumption,[237] since it might stifle innovation in the English school system by returning bureaucratic control to local government. Leora Cruddas, the Chief Executive of the Confederation of School Trusts, has raised concerns that it may cause greater fragmentation of the school system by disrupting established networks of school trusts, reversing the trend towards full academisation and causing a greater patchwork of school types.[238]

Enhanced local authority power over admissions

Clauses 47 and 48 of the Bill would mandate collaboration between local authorities and academies over school placement and admissions, and Clause 48 would allow local authorities to mandate the admission of particular pupils.[239] Local authorities gain the power to object to an academy's Published Admission Numbers (PANs) regardless of whether its numbers have increased, decreased or stayed the same.

This stands to grant local authorities significant supervision over academies' ability to expand. The Government's argument is that it will ensure local authorities have greater power to secure school places for harder to place children, such as those from more vulnerable or disadvantaged backgrounds. However, this threatens to end academies' freedoms over admissions. The Children's Commissioner has expressed concern over whether local authorities possess the expertise and capacity to absorb their increased responsibilities over school management and admissions.[240]

The power to object to PANs even when an academy's numbers are decreasing or remaining constant is particularly problematic, as it effectively provides local authorities with the power to insist that academies reduce in size, rather than simply creating a barrier to growth.

Labour's Bill - reform in the wrong direction

There remain genuine challenges within the English school system and areas where improvement has been less pronounced. However, the proposed reforms within the parts of the Government's Bill that relate to the laws governing academies and their relationship to local authorities risk much of the progress that has been made in positively reforming English schools.

Ending academy freedoms over recruitment and curriculum will strike at the heart of the principles of school freedom, competition and making space for innovation. Ending the academies presumption and granting power to local authorities over academy and MAT size will likely in practice halt the academisation process, tilting the direction of travel back towards local authority-maintained schools. Rather than providing a solution to the challenges described below of incomplete academisation, cold spots and the need to make greater provision for SEND, the proposed changes will simply increase state interference in schools without providing any clear advantages.

Remaining challenges facing the English school system

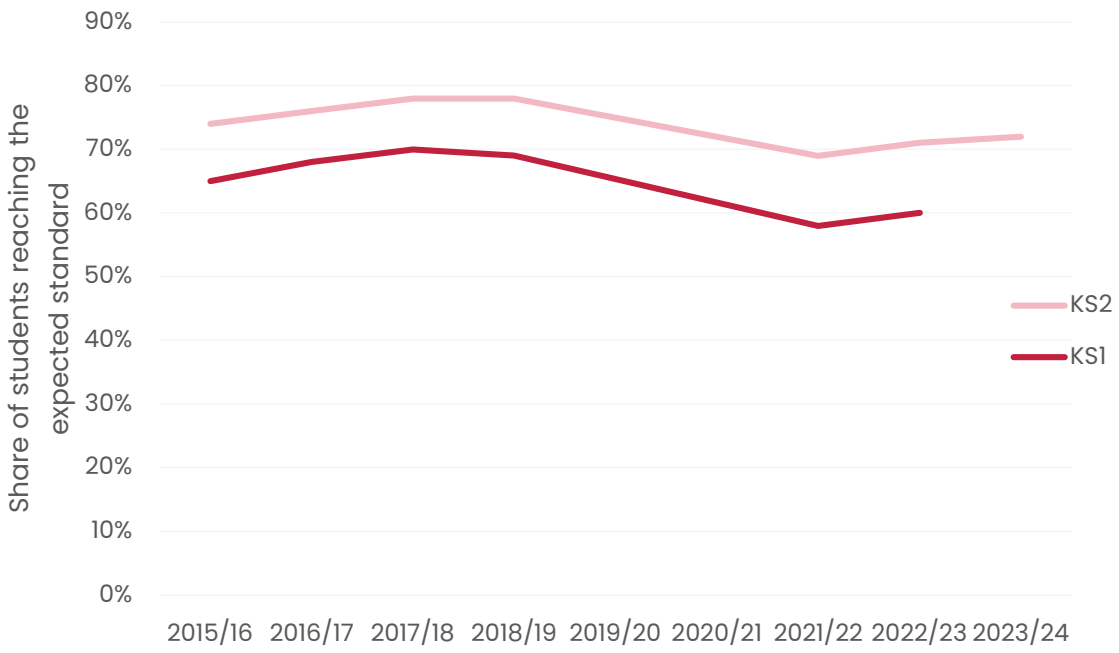
The Conservative-led reforms were overwhelmingly successful but are incomplete. Challenges remain, particularly around writing, services outside school such as free breakfast provision and extracurricular clubs, special educational needs (SEND), educational cold spots, teacher recruitment and retention, and the patchwork nature of the school system. Further reform and improvement are needed - but not of the kind currently being proposed by the Government.

There is further progress needed in KS1 and KS2 writing

While major progress has been made in reading and Maths, the same is not true of writing. There is not the same quantity of academic research to show exactly what works and practice therefore varies. Attainment data shows this to be a weakness, with a fall in the share of pupils achieving the expected standard in writing falling between 2019 and 2022 from 69% to 58% in KS1 and from 78% to 69% in KS2.

Figure 19: Percentage of pupils meeting the expected standard in writing in KS1 and KS2, 2015/16 - 2023/24

Source: Department for Education



Services outside of schools and pressure on teachers

One of the biggest challenges facing schools arises from social problems beyond the classroom. Over half of teachers in the UK (52%) say they feel they are seen as social workers by parents, and they spend too much time dealing with students' emotional needs.[241] This is out of step with teacher's expectations of their role, with half of teachers saying dealing with student's emotions problems is "not why they became a teacher".[242]

In a poll conducted by the National Association of Headteachers, only 23% of staff surveyed said they had access to specialist support for pupils with mental health needs, leaving teachers to fill the gaps in social care provision. 91% of teachers say that the increase in caring for students' social needs has had a negative impact on workload.[243] In 2024, research by Teach First found that 58% of teachers said they had put more hours into social issues over the past academic year than previously.[244]

More than two in five teachers (41%) say they are considering changing professions due to the toll of dealing with their students' behavioural and emotional issues.[245] This is in the context of a major challenge around teacher pay and retention.

Pandemic impact - school readiness, absence and suspensions

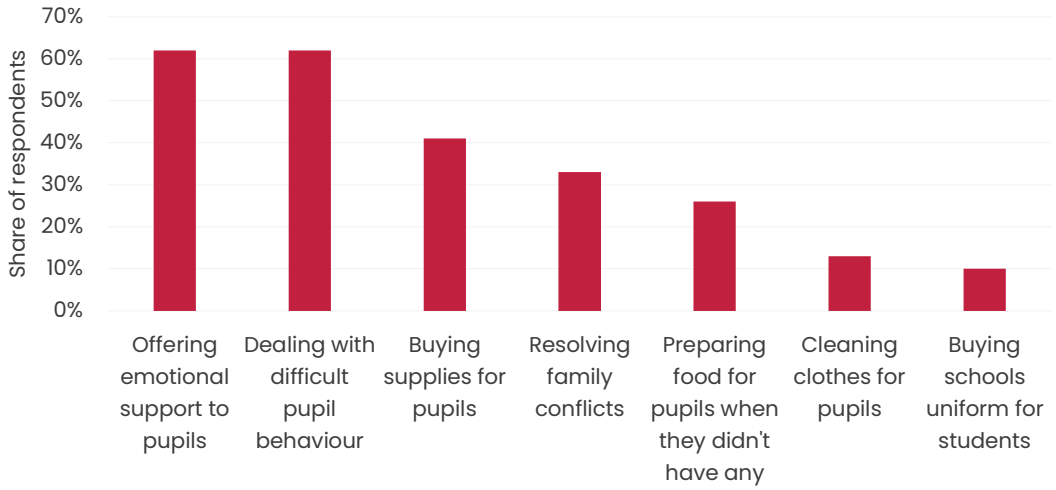
Since the Covid-19 pandemic and the reopening of schools, there has been an increase in pupils arriving at school not toilet trained, unable to dress themselves and without basic English language skills.[246]

The rate of school absence has also increased, with some pupils not returning to regular school attendance after the pandemic-period school closures. In 2023-24 there was a persistent absence rate (missing 10% or more of school sessions) of 19%, almost double the pre-pandemic rate. Severe absence (missing 50% or more of sessions) has also doubled since the pandemic, from less than 1% to over 2%.[247]

There is also evidence of poorer behavioural standards, with the share of Year 7 pupils in England who have received at least one suspension rising from 3.5% before the pandemic to 5.5% in 2022-23. The rate of Year 8 exclusions rose by 48% after the pandemic.[248]

Figure 20: Share of respondents that state they have provided the following social support to pupils outside of their academic duties

Source: Education Support and YouGov, 2022



Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

There remains high and increasing pressure on the SEND system. There are long waits to acquire an Educational Health and Care Plan (EHCP), and local authorities are struggling with the cost of funding SEND pupils within their authority area.[249]

Nearly a fifth of all of pupils in England are now diagnosed with SEND,[250] and the number of pupils with an EHCP has increased by 71% between 2018 and 2024.[251] Of primary school leavers in 2023-4, only 9% of pupils with EHCPs achieved the expected level in reading, writing and Mathematics.[252]

Closing the disadvantage gap and increasing the percentage of primary school pupils achieving the expected standard should be priorities for current and future governments. The Conservatives' 2022 Schools White Paper set the target at 90% by 2030.[253] SEND will require higher quality provision within mainstream schools but increased specialist provision, too.

Educational cold spots

There are particular challenges around areas with multiple underperforming schools. Previous government attempts to improve specific cold spots have been largely unsuccessful, including Opportunity Areas and Education Investment Areas.

Teacher recruitment and retention

There remains immense pressure on teacher recruitment and retention with little evidence of imminent improvement. In the year ending 2023, the secondary teacher recruitment target was missed by almost 50%.[254] There is particular pressure on some subjects, especially in STEM and languages. These missed targets should be read with some caution as they only refer to Initial Teacher Training (ITT) entrants, not those who come via other routes such as teacher returners, who accounted for a third of all the "new" teachers hired in 2023.[255] However, there is a real and pressing need to increase the number of teachers that are recruited and retained.

There are alternative models that could be considered. These include differentiated pay for subjects where degree holders could find relatively higher compensation in the private sector; more targeted training methods to use more specialist teachers more effectively, such as tailored training for Year 12 and 13 only subject specialist teachers and enabling easier retraining to shift between subjects. Action is also needed on administrative workload.

Some progress has stalled

While there was significant initial progress in encouraging pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to take EBacc subjects, the improvement in the rate of uptake has stalled, and uptake has not been equal across the school system. More needs to be done to ensure disadvantaged pupils are taking the most rigorous subjects which will prepare them for post-16 and post-18 education and the world of work.

Lessons and principles for further reform

School freedom, academisation, free schools and reforms to standards all succeeded because they reflected the right principles and an approach to structure grounded in evidence. The improvement to outcomes since the implementation of the reforms is undeniable. The principles reflected by the reform programme are summarised below and are a guide for future reform.

1. **Policymakers should be unashamedly academically ambitious.** The reforms of 2010 onwards explicitly aimed to raise the floor for all pupils, improving academic standards and setting high expectations. Part of the philosophy was that disadvantaged, more vulnerable and / or less academically gifted pupils could achieve more with the right teaching. The Conservative-led reforms helped to break the culture of low expectations as well as the administrative monopoly of local authorities.

2. **Teaching is a science, and the experts are the practitioners.** Academisation was based on the premise that headteachers knew more about how to turn a struggling school around than a public servant in a local authority or Whitehall. The curriculum reforms focused on what children should learn in terms of content, not how best to teach it. Accountability measures focused on assessing schools on their output rather than their input, with intervention reserved for when outputs are poor rather than when there is ideological disagreement. Further reforms should respect the principle of teacher independence and expertise rather than oversight by public officials.

3. **"Reform fatigue" should be avoided.** Almost every aspect of the structure of the school system, governance, teaching method, delivery, standards and subject content was changed while Michael Gove was Secretary of State for Education. Since then, reform has slowed significantly, most notably in the incomplete nature of academisation. Labour's Schools Bill will now lean heavily against the academisation process. In the early 2010s the Conservatives pushed through academisation and free schools even though they were harder to explain to the average voter on the doorstep. In the later 2010s, despite numerous attempts, the party struggled to re-grasp the structural reform agenda, leaving the incomplete, mixed system we have today, which Labour is set to unwind.

4. **There needs to be a new focus on disadvantaged pupils.** During the educational reform roll-out, improving outcomes and opportunity for the most disadvantaged pupils was used to communicate the importance of quite technical school reforms to help build a political case. The reality is that there is still a lot of work to be done on disadvantaged pupils and SEND. Delivering for these pupils is a vital part of the educational reform agenda, both for life chances and politically.

5. **Be wary of unintended consequences.** The DfE has responsibility for 22,000 schools and seven million pupils: political decision-makers have very little control over what actually happens in the classroom. This is one of the reasons why understanding the precise levers available to governments is so important. But it also means that every policy decision will inevitably result in outcomes that were not intended. This is why external expert opinion is so important.

   For example:

   - The reduction in the number of GCSEs being studied on average resulted from increased content and rigour.

   - The drop in performance in science in PISA tests for 14-year-olds is likely due to the decision to stop external testing of science at KS2.[256]

   - The decision to introduce the "2RI" policy, which allows the DfE to intervene to re-broker a school with a stronger MAT if it is rated by Ofsted as Requiring Improvement or below twice, was well-founded. However, the outcome was that it made Ofsted inspections much higher stake, contributing to a deteriorating relationship between Ofsted and the sector.

6. **Invest in and build up the outriders who will provide the evidence and expertise behind reform.** Policymaking is exceptionally difficult, particularly in education when the outcomes are so varied and can be hard to measure objectively. It is unrealistic to think that politicians are able to develop answers to important questions on their own, or that civil servants can manage educational innovation and delivery.

   Genuine expertise will usually come from outside government. The 2010 education reforms would not have been possible without extensive evidence and the excellent work of E.D. Hirsch, the Policy Exchange education practice, or some excellent headteachers who wanted to assist the programme of nationwide reform. While the free schools concept was incubated by the

Conservatives in Opposition pre-2010, it was done reasonably openly and this aided its implementation. One of the great achievements of the Conservatives was establishing the Education Endowment Foundation; the party must consider what similar partners and entities it will work with and rely on during this period and when they return to government.

7. **Consistency of personnel is important.** English schools now have some of the best readers in the Western world. The DfE enjoyed unusually long periods of ministerial continuity under the Conservative-led governments from 2010, particularly during the Coalition, and this was important for consistency and completion of the reform programme - it was politically prioritised. Reform should be considered carefully, planned and delivered to completion, not rushed or treated as of lesser importance.

Endnotes

[1] Hansard, UIN 24650, tabled on 2 May 2024, link; Note that the statistic refers to the share of only state-funded schools, rather than all schools (including private schools).
[2] House of Lords Library, *Academy Schools: Government plans for change*, 20 January 2025, link
[3] Department for Education, The Education Hub, *What are academy schools and what is forced academisation?*, 2 May 2023, link
[4] Department for Education, *Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child*, 28th March 2022, link
[5] Institute for Fiscal Studies, *Major challenges for education in Wales*, March 2024, link
[6] Department for Education, *Academisation Picture in Reading*, p. 5, November 2022, link
[7] Department for Education, *Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics*, 13 May 2010, link
[8] It does not address issues such as introducing stricter behavioural standards, reforms to Initial Teacher Training and training provided by the Early Career Framework, or the introduction of National Reference Tests. Nor does it consider new accountability measures such as Progress 8, or changes to school funding such as the introduction of the Pupil Premium. These are all important changes but are not the focus of this report.
[9] Full title: Children's Welfare and Schools Bill; while the first part of the Bill deals primarily with issues around child safeguarding and attendance, this report will address the second aspect of the Bill, which seeks to make important changes to school freedoms and the academies system, see House of Commons, *Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill*, link
[10] Academies Act 2010, link
[11] See Hansard, UIN 24650, link
[12] House of Lords Library, *Academy Schools: Government Plans for Change*, 20 January 2025, link/
[13] Department for Education, *School Characteristics*, 13 March 2025, link
[14] Department for Education, Academy Schools Sector in England: Consolidated annual report and accounts for the period 1 September to 31 August 2021, p31, figure 23, link
[15] Ibid.
[16] House of Commons Library, *Academies under the Labour Government*, 20 January 2015, link

[17] National Centre for Education Statistics, *Fast Facts: Charter schools*, link
[18] See BBC News, *Are Swedish free schools really a good model for the UK?*, 21 July 2025, link
[19] Department for Education, The Case for a Fully Trust Led System, p. 1, March 2022, link
[20] Department for Education, *'School characteristics' from 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics'*, 13 February 2025, link
[21] Department for Education, *Open academies, free schools, studio schools and UTCs*, [last updated 4 March 2025], link
[22] Department for Education, *'School characteristics' from 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics'*, 13 February 2025, link
[23] This dataset only begins in 2015/16
[24] Academies Act 2010, link
[25] Education Act 2011, link
[26] Schools Week, *School improvement unaffordable for country's biggest council*, 15 November 2024, link
[27] Local Government Association, *Save local services: Council pressures explained*, link
[28] The teachers surveyed were currently teaching in sponsored academies but had previously worked in maintained schools.
[29] See Department for Education, *The Case for a Fully Trust Led System*, March 2022, link
[30] Schools Week, *New London regional director revealed after RSC rebrand*, 5 August 2022, link
[31] Ofsted, *Multi-academy trusts: Benefits, challenges and functions*, July 2019, link
[32] Ibid., p.15
[33] Schools' Accountability: Findings from the 2019 annual parent survey, link
[34] House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, *Academy accounts and performance*, Seventy-third report of session, 2017-19, link
[35] Schools Week, *Send annual reports to better engage with parents, Carter tells academy trusts*, 2 November 2018, link
[36] Department for Education, Academy trust survey 2017, link
[37] Department for Education, *Schools' views on the perceived benefits and obstacles to joining a multi-academy trust*, Figures 9 and 10, link
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.
[41] See Department for Education, *The Case for a Fully Trust Led System*, *March 2022*, link
[42] Outwood Grange Academies Trust, link
[43] Schools' Week, *Transforming Ofsted's stuck schools is a moral imperative*, 13 January 2020, link
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ofsted, *Fight or flight? How "stuck" schools" are overcoming isolation: evaluation report*, 8 January 2020, link
[46] Schools' Week, *Transforming Ofsted's stuck schools is a moral imperative*, 13 January 2020, link
[47] Schools' Week, *Transforming Ofsted's stuck schools is a moral imperative*, 13 January 2020, link
[48] Outwood Grange Academies Trust, *Sustained Improvement Plan*, 2021-24, link
[49] Ibid.
[50] Department for Education, *The Case for a Fully Trust Led System*, March 2022, link. p32.
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