



Unexpected school reform: Academisation of primary schools in England[☆]



Andrew Eyles^{a,b}, Stephen Machin^{b,c}, Sandra McNally^{b,d,*}

^a Department of Economics, University College London, United Kingdom

^b Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics, United Kingdom

^c Department of Economics, London School of Economics, United Kingdom

^d School of Economics, University of Surrey, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 November 2016

Received in revised form 6 September 2017

Accepted 7 September 2017

Available online 11 September 2017

ABSTRACT

The UK change of government in 2010 provoked a large structural change in the English education landscape. Unexpectedly, the new government offered primary schools the chance to have 'the freedom and the power to take control of their own destiny', with better performing schools given a green light to fast track convert to become an academy school. In England, schools that become academies have more freedom over many ways in which they operate, including curriculum design, budgets, staffing issues and the shape of the academic year. However, the change to allow primary school academisation has been controversial. This paper reports estimates of the causal effect of academy enrolment on primary school pupils. While the international literature provides growing evidence on the effect of school autonomy in a variety of contexts, little is known about the effect of autonomy on primary schools (which are typically much smaller than secondary schools) and in contexts where the converting school is not deemed to be failing or disadvantaged. The key findings are that English primary schools did change their mode of operation after the exogenous policy change, utilising more autonomy and changing spending behaviour, but this did not lead to improved pupil performance.

© 2017 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Since 2010, the educational landscape in England has radically altered. By 2017, nearly two-thirds of secondary schools and over a fifth of primary schools are academies. Academy schools are granted considerable operational autonomy by government and have a battery of freedoms they can use that standard state schools cannot. As Michael Gove, the Minister then responsible for education, put it by enabling academisation these schools have been 'given the freedom and the power to take control of their own destiny'.¹

Although academies were present before then – principally as a school improvement policy for underperforming secondary schools since 2002 – the programme was radically altered and significantly expanded following the election of the new UK government in May 2010. It became a school structure to which all schools were invited to aspire

as enabling legislation – the Academies Act of 2010 – was rapidly put in place two months after the election of the new government.² For the first time, and through this completely unexpected policy change,³ primary schools were invited to become academies, with better performing schools being given priority to convert. The first batch of such schools converted in the school year beginning in September 2010. This paper reports estimates of the impact of primary school conversion to academy status on their operation and on the performance of enrolled pupils.

This introduction of primary academies took place in an international context where publicly-funded autonomous schools have become a familiar form of school improvement policy, most notably through

[☆] Acknowledgements: We would like to thank Jonah Rockoff, two referees and the following for helpful comments in seminars and conferences: Gabriel Heller-Sahlgren, Victor Lavy, Olmo Silva and participants at the IFN Stockholm Conference of June 2016, the MILLS Workshop in the Economics of Education in Bocconi University of June 2016 and the CESifo Economics of Education Network Conference of September 2016. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Economic and Social Research Council.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: s.mcnally1@lse.ac.uk (S. McNally).

¹ Department for Education (2013). Forward by Michael Gove MP.

² Most new academies since 2010 are 'converters'. However, some academies are sponsored (i.e. managed by a private team of independent co-sponsors) and these are schools that have been underperforming. The effect of academisation on these schools (which are closer to the original New Labour academies, studied by Eyles and Machin, 2015, and comprise about 30% of primary academies) is not considered in this paper, because we want to explore the unexpected dimension of academisation that applied to converters, and especially those rated outstanding prior to the 2010 change in policy.

³ The introduction of 'Free schools' and education reform were issues raised in the manifesto of the new government prior to their election; however, there was no mention of large-scale expansion of the academies programme. Free schools are completely new schools that can be set up by interested parties (e.g. parents, or community members). By 2016/17, there were 139 free primary schools open or approved.

charter schools in the US and free schools in Sweden. Research on the former tends to find achievement gains associated with charter status and with the ‘injection’ of charter school features to public schools, particularly in urban settings where the schools typically enrol disadvantaged students.⁴ In the Swedish context, there is some evidence of positive short and long term effects of the free school program, but these are found to work primarily through competition (see [Bolhmark and Lindahl, 2015](#)).

The policy studied here differs from most others in the literature in three important respects. Firstly, it involves conversion of existing schools rather than the creation of new schools.⁵ Secondly, it is about the voluntary conversion of better performing schools and not the forced conversion of failing schools. These better performing schools very clearly have a lower proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thirdly, the focus is on young children (aged 7–11) who attend primary schools, which are much smaller than secondary schools.⁶ Although there have been studies of elementary schools in the charter school context, these are less prevalent than studies of middle and high schools. Similarly, studies of autonomy in the context of the English education system have focused on particular subsets of secondary schools; specifically, advantaged secondary schools voluntarily gaining greater autonomy ([Clark, 2009](#)), disadvantaged secondary schools ([Eyles and Machin, 2015](#)), and secondary schools in relatively disadvantaged local authorities (e.g. Birmingham in the case of [Bertoni et al., 2017](#)).

Upon conversion, academy schools gain autonomy over many process and personnel decisions. This greater freedom may have positive effects on student outcomes because of superior information held by local decision makers ([Hanushek and Woessmann, 2011](#)). Indeed, the first secondary schools in England to become academies (in the early 2000s) did seem to deliver positive effects on student outcomes ([Eyles and Machin, 2015](#); and [Eyles et al., 2016a, 2016b](#)). However, the context was one in which a couple of hundred (previously significantly underperforming) secondary schools became academies. It is not necessarily the case that these positive effects carry through to better performing schools and/or to (much smaller) primary schools.

If the autonomy offered within the academies model was unambiguously advantageous for schools, one would imagine that all schools would want to become academies. However, recently the UK government has had to back out of a policy to force all schools in England to become academies by the end of 2022 because of fierce hostility to this by the educational establishment (although the current government vision is still to encourage all schools to become academies).

Whether such radical upheaval is in the interests of students is an empirical question. Most schools yet to convert are primary schools,

⁴ [Eple, Romano and Zimmer \(2016\)](#) provide an overview of the literature. While something of a consensus has emerged, there is also some controversy within the charter school research. Recent experimental studies of charters in or near particular US cities (Boston and New York) find positive impacts on educational achievement (see [Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2011](#); [Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2016](#); [Angrist et al., 2010, 2013](#); [Dobbie and Fryer, 2011, 2013](#); [Hoxby and Murarka, 2009](#)). Wider coverage evaluations have produced more mixed results ([Betts et al., 2006](#); [Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009, 2013](#); [Gleason et al., 2010](#)). Similarly, there is no consensus on the longer term effects of charters. [Angrist et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Dobbie and Fryer \(2014\)](#) find that charter attendance improves longer run outcomes such as college attendance. In later work, [Dobbie and Fryer \(2016\)](#) find negative earnings returns for those attending charters that are ineffective at raising test scores and no returns for charters that are successful at raising test scores.

⁵ While the majority of school autonomy studies focus on newly set up autonomous schools (e.g. the majority of US charters are new schools), there are some examples of studies where existing schools become more autonomous. [Clark \(2009\)](#) and [Eyles and Machin \(2015\)](#) study English secondary schools gaining more autonomy, while [Abdulkadiroglu et al. \(2016\)](#) study the conversion of traditional public schools in New Orleans to (in-district) charters. Alongside these [Steinberg \(2014\)](#) studies the granting of greater operational freedom to a subset of principals in already existing Chicago Public Schools.

⁶ While the majority of charter papers focus on middle and high schools, some papers do include results for elementary schools ([Dobbie and Fryer, 2011, 2013](#); and [Hoxby et al., 2009](#)).

which represent the vast majority of schools in England. One might hypothesise that schools which volunteered to convert to academy status early-on are those that were most amenable to academy status, anticipating positive benefits. If effects are not found for such schools, one might question whether it is such a good idea to extend it to schools that are less enthusiastic.

An important feature of the policy being studied here is that it was in no way anticipated by schools or parents. This gives leverage to identify causal effects since the conversion was exogenous to pupils already enrolled in the school. Thus, the sample studied is restricted to these ‘legacy enrolled’ pupils who can be observed before and after academisation takes place. The importance of estimating effects for pupils who were already enrolled in the school prior to conversion emerges because student mobility post-conversion is potentially endogenous to the policy itself. For example, parents may be attracted by the idea of academy status and be more likely to enrol their children to newly converted primary schools. Exit from the school post-conversion might also be non-random (for example, if schools change policies in a way that is less attractive to certain students or their parents). However, in the empirical work discussed below, a very strong first stage estimate (of the effect of pre-conversion enrolment on the probability of attending an academy) suggests that a causal effect of academy attendance is identified for the majority of eligible pupils in the school.

In practical terms, the empirical strategy adopted in this paper first involves selection of treatment and control groups of schools. The treatment group consists of primary schools that converted to academy status between 2010/11 and 2014/15. In each case, the control groups are those that converted in later academic years, but before 2016/17. Under certain conditions, these treatment and control schools are shown to have similar pre-trends in outcome variables. Further, enrolment in the primary school prior to conversion is used as an instrument for actual attendance in the academy in grade 6 when national tests in reading and maths take place. The legacy enrolment strategy mirrors that used in [Eyles and Machin \(2015\)](#) in their study of the first underperforming English secondary schools to become academies in the early 2000s. It also draws on [Fryer \(2014\)](#) who looks at the effect of injecting charter school practices into traditional public schools and [Abdulkadiroglu et al. \(2016\)](#), who study school takeovers in New Orleans, referring to pupils who stay in converting schools as ‘grand-fathered’ pupils.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. [Section 2](#) describes primary education in England and offers a discussion of the institutional features characterising the introduction of academy schools. [Section 3](#) describes the data and research strategy. [Section 4](#) reports results from the first part of the empirical analysis, looking at whether primary schools that became academies did in fact change their modes of operation upon conversion. [Section 5](#) reports the legacy enrolment results looking at causal effects of academy conversion on pupil performance. Conclusions are given in [Section 6](#).

2. Primary education in England and academy schools

2.1. Primary education

In England, children start school in the September after they reach the age of 4. Most children attend a primary school up to age 11, after which they go to secondary school.⁷ Schooling in England is organised into Key Stages. At the end of Key Stage 1 (age 7), pupils are assessed by their teachers in English and maths according to national guidelines.

⁷ There is a small number of infant schools and middle schools in parts of the country. They are not included in this analysis unless they are ‘linked’, meaning that students at an infant school are prioritised for places at the junior school; in these cases, the proportion of infant school attendees switching to the linked junior school is very high and the two linked schools are treated as though they were one single school.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5101747>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5101747>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)