

January 2025

# ACADEMIES AND FREE SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND

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A Policy Exchange Briefing Paper

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## Introduction

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill proposes a number of changes to schools in England. In particular it contains measures to end many of the 'academy freedoms' around curriculum, teacher training and pay that academies and free schools have previously enjoyed – ending two decades of cross-party consensus on how to improve schools. These changes endanger the dramatic educational improvements that have occurred in England over this period.

### Key Findings

- Between 2009 and 2023, England's performance in global PISA rankings has improved from 27<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> in maths and from 25<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> in reading.
- 17 out of the top 20 English secondary schools with the highest Progress 8 (value added) scores are academies or free schools, as are 84% of the top 50.
- Poorly performing schools that were required to academize show rapid improvement – with 14% more of these schools achieving 'good' or 'outstanding' Ofsted ratings between 2018 and 2023 – compared to only a 4% increase amongst local authority-maintained schools.
- Requiring all unqualified teachers working in academies to obtain Qualified Teacher Status would cost between £54 million and £127 million.

## What are academies and free schools?

Academies and free schools are state-funded schools that are independent of local authority control. Free schools are distinct from academies in that they are newly created schools, whereas most academies have been converted from local authority-maintained schools, but both operate under the same legal framework. There were 650 free schools in England in 2023 and 10,640 academies in

2023/24 – equivalent to 42.7% of primary schools and 81.9% of secondary schools.<sup>1</sup>

Academies were first created in the early 2000s under the Labour Government. Andrew Adonis, then-Labour schools minister, asserted the importance of academies within the English education system:

*'Academies are radical public service reform in action. They address the imperative for every child, whatever their background, to receive a good education, as a preparation for life, work and citizenship.'*<sup>2</sup>

Free schools were first introduced in 2010 by the Coalition government. The new government also rapidly expanded Labour's academies programme, as called for by Policy Exchange in its 2009 report, '[A guide to school choice reforms](#)'.<sup>3</sup> Under the Academies Act 2010, schools which receive an 'Inadequate' rating from Ofsted must be transferred from local authority control and become academies under a process known as an academy order. This can also occur when a school receives two or more consecutive Ofsted ratings below 'good'.

## How have academies and free schools used their freedoms to deliver educational improvements?

Academies and free schools have a range of specific freedoms that have allowed them to innovate to improve their educational offering.

### Curriculum

Academies and free schools are not required to follow the National Curriculum. Many schools have used these freedoms to expand their curriculum offering to cover a greater range of subjects and topics in a more rigorous way.

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<sup>1</sup> Gov.uk, 'Free schools – how we are creating 12,000 new school places in disadvantaged areas', 22 August 2023, [link](#); Gov.uk, 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics', 6 June 2024, [link](#)

<sup>2</sup> The Guardian, 'Academies are a success story', 25 August 2006, [link](#)

<sup>3</sup> Policy Exchange, 'A guide to school choice reforms', 23 March 2009, [link](#)

- Michaela Community School, a free school with the highest Progress 8 scores in England, has created a bespoke curriculum which sees students read classic Greek myths in Year 7 English and students receiving intensive 6 week instruction on algebraic equations.
- ARK Schools have developed a distinctive rigorous and knowledge-rich curriculum, which they now use to support other Multi-Academy Trusts through their Subject Excellence Programmes.

### **Teacher Pay and Compensation**

Academies are not required to follow national teacher pay scales. Several academy trusts have used this freedom to innovate to attract and retain more excellent teachers, whilst giving them more flexibility over their compensation packages.

- ARK, which runs 39 schools in deprived inner-city and coastal communities, pays 2.5% above the pay scale.
- United Learning, England's largest Multi-Academy Trust, pays its teachers on average 5% above national pay scales. Since 2024 United Learning has also offered teaching staff the opportunity to increase their salary by up to 15% in exchange for reduced employee and employer pension contributions.

### **Teacher Training and Qualified Teacher Status (QTS)**

Teaching staff at academies and free schools are not required to have QTS or, if they are a new teacher, to be part of an induction programme. Academies have used this freedom to recruit skilled overseas staff with foreign teaching qualifications, or those with relevant academic expertise in their subject areas.

- There are currently 13,600 unqualified teachers in the state sector. It has been estimated that the cost of supporting all of these teachers to obtain QTS would be between £54 million and £127 million.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gov.uk, 'Opposition Costings – Mandatory Qualified Teacher Status', [link](#)

## Timetables

Academies have the freedom to change the shape of the school day – a policy previously championed by Policy Exchange in its report '[Only A Matter of Time?](#)'.<sup>5</sup>

- NET Academies Trust has expanded the school day at its primary schools by between 30 and 40 minutes, offset by longer half-term holidays.

## What impact have academies and free schools had on education in England?

The expansion of academies and free schools over the last 15 years has coincided with significant improvements in the quality of English schools:

- England's PISA rankings in maths increased from 27<sup>th</sup> in maths in 2009 to 11<sup>th</sup> in 2023, and from 25<sup>th</sup> in reading to 13<sup>th</sup>.<sup>6</sup>
- In science, England's TIMSS ranking rose from 15<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> in Year 5 and from 9<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> in Year 9 between 2011 and 2023.<sup>7</sup>
- 84% of the 50 secondary schools with the highest Progress 8 (value added) scores are academies or free schools.
- 90% of English schools were judged good or outstanding by Ofsted in 2024, an increase of 22% since 2010 – with failing schools that have recently academized making the most rapid improvements.

Some research has argued that local authority-maintained schools on average have higher Ofsted ratings than academies. Yet this is misleading. As previously noted, failing maintained schools are required under the Academies Act 2010 to become academies. This means that the remaining maintained schools are an

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<sup>5</sup> Policy Exchange, 'Only A Matter of Time? A framework for the most effective way to lengthen the school day in England', 12 August 2014, [link](#)

<sup>6</sup> Gov.uk, 'England among highest performing western countries in education', 5 December 2023, [link](#)

<sup>7</sup> IEA TIMSS and PIRLS: Boston College, 'TIMSS: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study', [link](#)

unrepresentative sample as underperforming maintained schools are removed and converted into academies.

Academies, and free schools in particular, have also played an important role in introducing greater parental choice, creating a dynamic educational environment that has driven schools of all kinds to improve to attract pupils and families. As Michael Gove, then Education Secretary, argued in a speech to Policy Exchange in 2011:

*'The highest-performing education systems are those where government knows when to step back. We want a school system in which teachers have more power and in which they are more accountable to parents - not politicians. It's this characteristic of success, this driver of reform, that I want to focus on today. Rigorous research from the OECD and others has shown that more autonomy for individual schools helps raise standards.'*<sup>8</sup>

### **Progress 8 Scores**

Progress 8 scores measure the progress a student makes from the end of KS2 (the last year of primary school) to KS4 (when they take their GCSEs). A score above zero indicates pupils do better than the national average, whilst a score below zero indicates they do worse.

84% of secondaries with the highest Progress 8 schools in England are academies or free schools.<sup>9</sup> For example Michaela Community School, an academy, has the highest Progress 8 score in England in 2024 at 2.55, meaning that on average students at the school achieved two and a half grades higher in each subject at GCSE than they had been expected to. A study found that 25 out of 30 (83%) of England's schools with the highest Progress 8 scores for disadvantaged students were academies or free schools.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Gov.uk, 'Michael Gove's speech to the Policy Exchange on free schools', 20 June 2011, [link](#)

<sup>9</sup> Gov.uk, 'Compare school and college performance in England', [link](#)

<sup>10</sup> We Are In Beta Community, 'Top-performing state secondary schools with high Progress 8 for disadvantaged students 2023', 28 November 2024, [link](#)

## Ofsted Ratings

In August 2024 90% of all English schools were judged good or outstanding by Ofsted.<sup>11</sup> This is a significant increase from the 68% judged good or outstanding by Ofsted in 2010.<sup>12</sup> In the same period between 2010 and 2024, the number of academies in England increased from 202 schools to 10,640.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, poorly performing schools that were previously maintained by local authorities but have been required to academize showed greater improvement than maintained schools as a whole. Between 2018-2023 the number of maintained schools rated 'good' or 'outstanding' increased by just 4%, whereas the equivalent rating amongst 'sponsored' academies (those forced to academize due to poor performance) saw a 14% improvement.<sup>14</sup>

## How do the Government's proposed reforms threaten academy and free school freedoms?

The Government's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill would remove most of the freedoms academies and free schools currently have, bringing them in line with local authority-maintained schools.

- Clause 40 will extend the Education Act 2002 to academies by requiring teachers in academies to have Qualified Teacher Status.
- Clause 41 of the bill would amend the Academies Act 2010 to require academies and free schools to follow the National Curriculum.
- Clause 44 would repeal elements of the Academies Act 2010 which require failing maintained schools to become academies.

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<sup>11</sup> Gov.uk, 'Main findings: State-funded schools inspections and outcomes as at 31 August 2024', 26 November 2024, [link](#)

<sup>12</sup> Gov.uk, '88% of schools now rated good or outstanding – and how we're making sure Ofsted ratings are up to date', 29 November 2022, [link](#)

<sup>13</sup> Gov.uk, 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics', 6 June 2024, [link](#)

<sup>14</sup> Schools Week, 'Fact check: Do council schools really outperform academies?', 3 August 2023, [link](#)

- Clause 45 extends the existing statutory pay and conditions framework for teachers to academies and free schools, ending discretion over pay. The government has subsequently promised to amend the bill to ensure that whilst schools will have to pay the minimum pay scale, there will be no maximum limit on teacher pay.<sup>15</sup>
- Clause 51 amends the Education and Inspections Act 2006 to remove the expectation that all new schools should be academies.

These changes will undermine the culture of innovation and competition that has driven school improvement in England over the last two decades.

The Confederation of Schools Trusts has argued for academy freedoms to be extended to all schools in England:

*'Trusts have taken on and turned around some of the most underperforming schools in the system, especially those that serve some of the most disadvantaged areas in England. This diversity in provision in the school system has enabled innovation and improvement in a way that was not previously possible. This has been achieved in part by the freedoms and flexibilities that academy trusts have had...*

*If we are to create an improving education system, all types of schools should now have the freedoms and flexibilities that have hitherto been reserved for the academy trust system.'*<sup>16</sup>

In an open letter to the Education Secretary, Katherine Birbalsingh, the headmistress of Micheala Community School, the school with the highest Progress 8 score in the country whilst serving a disproportionately high number of deprived students, has written about the damage that removing flexibilities will do:

*'A rigid national curriculum that dictates adherence to a robotic, turgid and monotonous programme of learning that prevents headteachers from giving their children a bespoke offer tailored to the needs of their pupils, is quite frankly, horrifying. Anyone in teaching who has an entrepreneurial spirit, who*

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<sup>15</sup> Schools Week, 'Government will amend schools bill over academy teacher pay', 21 January 2025, [link](#)

<sup>16</sup> Confederation of Schools Trusts, 'CST Policy Statement on Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill', 17 January 2025, [link](#)



*enjoys thinking creatively about how best to address the needs of their pupils, will be driven out of the profession...*

*...Why would you want to prevent schools from hiring graduates and then getting them trained through a variety of routes? I have lost count of the number of unqualified teachers we have hired at Michaela who have been trained with us and then, after some years, have gone on to middle and senior roles at other schools, taking the expertise they have gained from working with us. My current Head of Year 11 is one such teacher. He used to be in the army and is doing a superb job with the kids. With your new rules, I would never have been able to hire him. Again, what is the problem you are trying to solve? And why would you do this when nationally we have a teacher shortage and a recruitment problem? We need as many routes into the profession as possible.<sup>17</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> The Spectator, 'What problem is the Education Secretary trying to solve? An open letter to Bridget Phillipson', 17 January 2025, [link](#)

## Appendix 1: Progress 8 Scores by School Type<sup>18</sup>

School Name	Progress 8 Score	Type of School
Michaela Community School	2.55	Academy
Mercia School	2.09	Academy
Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School	2.05	Academy
Eden Boys' School, Birmingham	1.59	Academy
The Steiner Academy Hereford	1.57	Academy
Menorah High School for Girls	1.57	Maintained School
Mossbourne Victoria Park Academy	1.54	Academy
Eden Girls' School, Coventry	1.52	Academy
Mossbourne Community Academy	1.47	Academy
The St Thomas the Apostle College	1.45	Maintained School
Wembley High Technology College	1.42	Academy
Ark Greenwich Free School	1.4	Academy
Ada Lovelace Church of England High School	1.4	Academy
St Mark's Catholic School	1.35	Academy
Ashcroft Technology Academy	1.34	Academy
The Totteridge Academy	1.32	Academy
Altrincham Grammar School for Boys	1.32	Academy
Ealing Fields High School	1.31	Academy
St Olave's and St Saviour's Grammar School	1.27	Maintained School
Wilson's School	1.27	Academy
Tauheedul Islam Boys' High School	1.26	Academy
Sacred Heart Catholic School	1.25	Academy
St Paul's School for Girls	1.23	Maintained School
Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet	1.22	Academy
Hasmonean High School for Girls	1.21	Academy
King Edward VI School	1.21	Academy

<sup>18</sup> Gov.uk, 'Compare school and college performance in England', [link](#)

Eden Boys' Leadership Academy, Manchester	1.2	Academy
St Andrew's Catholic School	1.2	Maintained School
Ark King Solomon Academy	1.18	Academy
Eden Girls' Leadership Academy, Birmingham	1.18	Academy
Dr Challoner's Grammar School	1.18	Academy
The Kingston Academy	1.16	Academy
JFS	1.16	Maintained School
Sutton Grammar School	1.16	Academy
Eden Girls' School, Slough	1.15	Academy
Madani Girls' School	1.14	Maintained School
Glenmoor Academy	1.14	Academy
Hethersett Academy	1.13	Academy
The Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe	1.13	Academy
Seven Kings School	1.12	Maintained School
St Peter's Catholic School	1.12	Academy
Bedford Free School	1.11	Academy
Dr Challoner's High School	1.11	Academy
King Edward VI Grammar School, Chelmsford	1.11	Academy
Dartford Grammar School	1.11	Academy
The Henrietta Barnett School	1.1	Academy
The King's School, Grantham	1.1	Academy
Avanti House School	1.1	Academy
Colchester Royal Grammar School	1.1	Academy
King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys	1.09	Academy