# Report reveals poor performance by UK academies and free schools

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The UK coalition government's claim that "academisation" and privatisation of state education is aimed at improving student performance has been dealt a blow by the recent end-of-year report by OFSTED (The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, the regulatory government body that scrutinises the performance of all schools).

There are 21,975 schools in England, with more than 450,000 teachers and 7,700,000 pupils. Six in 10 secondary schools are now academies and free schools (state-funded but privately run)—almost half of them in MATs (Multi Academy Trusts). Of the 16,787 primary schools, 13 percent are now academies and free schools.

The report shows that whilst children in primary schools, where academisation is still low and the majority of academies have only transferred in the past year or two, have made some improvement in their rating, in the secondary sector school ratings have gone backwards.

Eighty-two percent of primary schools are now "good" or "outstanding", an increase on last year. However, just 71 percent of secondary schools are marked the same. It means some 170,000 pupils are now in inadequate secondary schools compared with 100,000 two years ago.

According to OFSTED, this year a greater proportion of secondary schools declined from "good" or "outstanding" than primary schools. Thirty-five percent of secondary schools previously "good" or "outstanding" declined to "requires improvement" or "inadequate", up from 24 percent in 2012-2013.

The report also reveals that some 30 percent of free schools need to improve compared with 19 percent among all schools in the state sector.

One of the central planks of the government's promotion of academies and free schools was that state schools were incapable of narrowing the social divide and improving achievement for the most disadvantaged children. OFSTED's statistics indicate that children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, particularly those categorised as "white British", are still most likely to be failed by the system. There has been some progress in primary schools, where the gap in mathematics attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 (four years of schooling for those aged between 7 and 11) between disadvantaged pupils and those from better-off backgrounds, has narrowed by seven percentage points since 2007.However, the gap in attainment for disadvantaged secondary pupils is only one percentage point lower than it was in 2007.

Some of the statistics reflect the major educational restructuring imposed over the course of the last year, including a new national curriculum—changes to pupil assessment and progress tracking as the previous national curriculum levels are phased out and new, tougher examinations introduced. Overall, they expose the fact that the government's drive to privatise education is having a devastating impact on the education of children.

Sir Michael Wilshaw, OFSTED chief inspector, has explicitly stated that struggling schools are no better off in academy chains than under local authority control. Speaking on the government's claims that academy status can successfully turn around failing schools, Wilshaw said. "It doesn't matter if they belong to a local authority or a multi-academy trust. If oversight is poor and expectations low, the problems are uniformly similar and depressingly predictable: a lack of strategy to help the weakest schools and an absence of challenge to the best."

The conclusions that OFSTED draws, however, are not to stop the further privatisation of education. Rather, the emphasis on "poor teaching" will only further strengthen the government's ideologically driven agenda against the teaching profession.

Although Wilshaw did not single out any academy chains by name, a recent OFSTED inspection of schools belonging to AET, the country's largest chain, found that half of its schools were failing to deliver a good education.

In some boroughs, academies have been blamed for dragging down educational standards. In Tameside, Greater Manchester, just 49 percent of secondary students in the borough attend a school rated "good" or "outstanding" by

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OFSTED.

Tameside is ranked 138th out of the 150 local authorities in England. Seven of the borough's 15 schools are now academies and no longer under local authority control. Ged Cooney, executive member for learning at Tameside council, said: "We have known for some time that the borough's academy schools, which the council has no control over, were negatively affecting this score. Thirty seven percent of pupils attending these academies attend a good or outstanding school compared to 63 percent for the eight schools under our jurisdiction.

"So when Sir Michael Wilshaw talks of only 50 percent of pupils attending schools in Tameside classed as good or better, this is disproportionately impacted by academies."

Many academies and free schools have been dogged by accusations of corruption, nepotism and bad management. Recently, it was revealed that sponsors of St. Adhelm's Academy in Poole, Dorset, want to "pull out" after OFSTED judged it "inadequate". Poole borough council has now stepped in with support, but under the current regulations, once a school is academised, it cannot be returned to its local authority and a new sponsor is being sought.

Wellington Academy, which is sponsored by Wellington College, one of the country's most exclusive independent (private) schools, has been judged by OFSTED as requiring improvement. Hartsbrook—a free school in Haringey, London that was run by E-Act and supported by Highgate independent school—was found to be inadequate in every OFSTED category. The school was closed after E-Act, a chain that runs 24 academies and free schools in England, pulled out and has since reopened as Brooke House.

In 2012, Cuckoo Hall was one of the highest performing primary schools in the country, but by the end of last year, the number of children achieving government-set test targets had plummeted from 86 percent to 54. Now, executive headteacher Dame Patricia Sowter, headteacher Sharon Ahmet, and Mrs. Sowter's husband, Phil, who is a director of the trust that runs the 870-pupil school, in Enfield, London, have all been suspended following allegations of gross misconduct. The allegations appear to relate to exam fixing.

Knighted in 2011, Dame Patricia, whose chain now runs three more schools, was described by former education secretary Michael Gove as possessing "luminous intelligence". In a speech in March 2012, Gove praised her as one of his "magnificent" seven headteachers. Two years on, and three of those seven have had their probity questioned. In 2012, Greg Wallace left the Best Start Federation in Hackney after awarding valuable computer contracts to his partner. Mr. Wallace has since found a role with one of the larger academy chains. Sir Peter Burkett left the Barnfield Federation in 2013 with a golden handshake, a company car and questions over a £1 million grant awarded for non-existent students. That Trust has since been disbanded.

In the same week that the OFSTED report was published, research was published by the Local Government Association, which revealed that academy conversions cost English councils £22 million between 2011 and 2013. When schools convert, the local authority must pick up any deficit balance, but if a converting school has a surplus this carries over to the academy trust.

Commenting on the research, Christine Blower, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, the largest teachers' union, said, "It has always been perfectly clear that for many schools the attraction of becoming an academy was financial and nothing to do with supposed additional 'autonomy' or education standards. Barely a week goes by without some tale of malpractice or inadequate standards in academies and free schools. It is quite obvious that this expensive and disruptive experiment has to stop."

The reality is that despite widespread opposition to the privatisation agenda amongst teachers and parents, the teaching unions have not lifted a finger to stop the academy projects and have repeatedly dissipated the opposition through their repeated sabotage of strike action.

Academy status is a smokescreen for the abolition of state funding of schools in order to turn education, as with all other vital public services, over to big business. Its aim is to eradicate what remains of the system of comprehensive public education. The comprehensive ethos has long been despised by the Tories and abandoned by Labour because, notwithstanding its limitations, the stated objective was to establish a standard of non-selective, free and universal education for millions of working class children.

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