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COMMENT: Cameron forges on with academies revolution despite mounting concerns on oversight

Dr [Michael Jopling](#), examines whether the Department of Education really can effectively take on schools formerly run by local government.

If anyone thought that another scathing report by MPs into the Coalition's academies policy might put its expansion on ice, the prime minister has quickly proved them wrong. In a speech laying out the Conservative's [education policy](#) ahead of the election, David Cameron has given no ground.

Focusing on the need to raise standards and wage “[an all-out war on mediocrity](#)”, he outlined that if the Conservatives win the election, schools rated by Ofsted as “requires improvement” would be taken over by “the best headteachers” and required to become academies. Currently, this only applies to schools rated “inadequate”.

Since coming to power in 2010, the Coalition government’s education policy has greatly increased schools’ autonomy in pursuit of [a “self-improving system”](#). [A growing body of research](#) has suggested that this has masked increasing centralisation, as power – but crucially not accountability – has been transferred from local to national government.

An oversight on oversight

It is one of the quirks of the English language that the word “oversight” means both overseeing something and the “unintentional failure to notice or do something”. The Public Accounts Committee’s (PAC) new report, [School oversight and intervention](#), makes good use of this ambiguity in its attack on Department for Education policy.

Although Conservatives outnumber Labour and Liberal Democrats on the committee, the report does not hold back in its seven damning conclusions. These include the existence of “significant gaps” in the department’s knowledge of performance in individual schools and a lack of clarity regarding local authorities’ safeguarding duties towards academy pupils. MPs also criticised failures both to intervene in some under-performing schools and to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions where they have been made.

What the PAC’s report clearly highlights is what many commentators and researchers [have been saying](#) for some time: it is impossible for the Department of Education to effectively take on the oversight formerly fulfilled by local government, now that academies have been removed from their control.

A no-man’s land of non-intervention

The report states that the department’s reliance on a narrow set of indicators means that it has missed individual failures in schools and has become over-reliant on whistleblowers – pointing to the [“Trojan Horse” affair in Birmingham last year](#) as a notorious example.

It recommends that additional indicators are developed to be incorporated into how oversight bodies identify under-performance, though it is not clear about how these bodies are to be constituted or how they might have contributed to a more measured response to the “Trojan Horse” allegations. It also suggests an evaluation of the effectiveness of the eight [Regional Schools Commissioners](#) introduced in September 2014 to oversee academies. MPs suggest that they alone are unlikely to be able to supply the local intelligence necessary to monitor the progress of 4,500 academies.

Where local authorities have retained the responsibility to intervene in the area of safeguarding academy pupils, the lack of clarity of the Department’s guidance, coupled with its promotion of school autonomy, has created a no-man’s land of non-intervention in areas where academies and local authorities have poor relationships. This is paralleled by criticisms of the department’s failure to intervene in some academies which have been identified as under-performing.

It is difficult to see how Cameron’s announcement that even more schools will be turned into academies will address any of the issues highlighted in the PAC report – nor those of [another report from the Education Select Committee](#) questioning the evidence around whether academies help raise school standards. MPs’ concerns about the lack of assessment of academy sponsors have been assuaged somewhat by [an announcement](#) by the secretary of state for education, Nicky Morgan in late January, that academy chains would be inspected by Ofsted. Yet when it comes to the [extra “super-heads”](#) that will be needed, there is as yet no indication of where they will be found.



Context behind the soundbites

Most importantly perhaps, it is too early to say whether large-scale academisation can achieve the system-level transformation that the government claims. Asked to comment on the Education Select Committee report [on the BBC](#), Morgan asserted that:

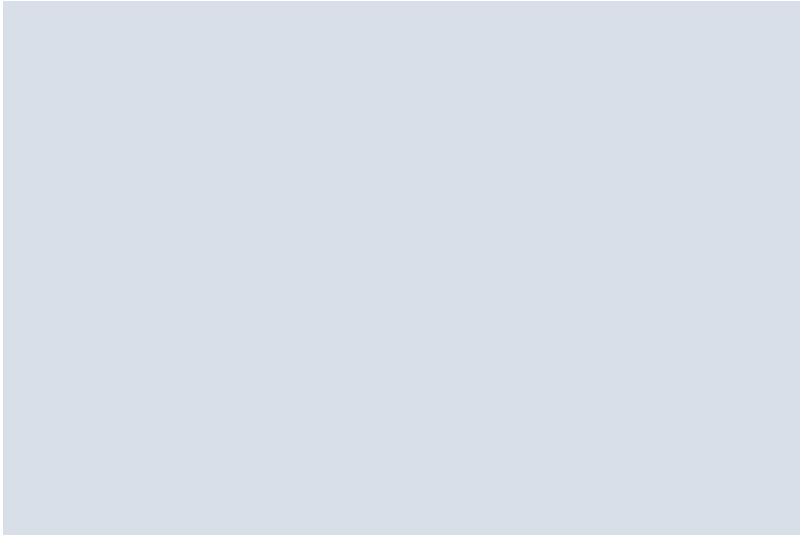
We know that schools that have become academies, particularly those converted, their Key Stage 2, that's the exams that children take at the age of 11, and also their GCSEs, are better.

This initially sounds like evidence-based policy, rather than conviction politics, but it's worth checking the numbers. If we take the most recent Key Stage 2 results published in December 2014, there are 1,440 primary academies, or almost 10% of all state-funded mainstream primary schools in England. Even without taking any contextual factors into account, 79% of pupils in both local authority schools and academies [achieved the expected Level 4 or above in reading, writing and mathematics tests](#).

Converter academies – those that voluntarily converted to academy status – did better than this. But sponsored academies – which became academies as part of a government intervention and have an approved sponsor – and free schools were at or below the 79% mark. At GCSE level, converter academies outperformed local authority schools in key measures, but sponsored academies and free schools did not.

Without in-depth, contextualised examination of the data over time, this cannot be regarded as evidence of sustainable improvement. Cameron's speech suggests that the Conservatives intend to carry on regardless with an untested policy, ignoring the criticisms of MPs and perpetuating their oversights.

Next read: [Have we devolved too much responsibility for our schools?](#)



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Contacts



Rik Kendall

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Business and Law

rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk

07923 382339