General Election 2019
An analysis of manifesto plans for education

Priority 5: Access to good schools

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December 2019

Nuffield Foundation

EDUCATION POLICY INSTITUTE

Research Area:
Election Analysis

Priority 5: Access to good schools

While the school attended explains a relatively small proportion of the variation in pupil outcomes it still matters. The difference in outcomes between the highest and lowest performing schools on the government's key measure of performance is equivalent to around two grades in each GCSE subject.

It is not simply about attainment. For example, the school a child attends might affect whether they have appropriate support for special educational needs, and whether they are more likely to be excluded or experience an unexplained exit.

But access to high performing schools is still not equitable, and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to attend good schools than are their peers. School admissions criteria, the location of high performing schools, parental preferences, and family resources available to navigate the admissions system (financial, social and educational), all appear to play a role in determining this outcome.

The current landscape

Geographical variation

Access to high performing secondary schools became more geographically unequal over the period 2010-2015, in spite of government policies aimed at improving school performance outside higher performing areas such as London.[1] Access to high performing secondary schools is better in areas such as London and in parts of the South, but is poor in areas such as the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, and parts of the Midlands.

Academies and free schools

Over the past decade, improving access to good schools has tended to focus on structural reform – largely through the academies and free schools programme. By November 2019, 35 per cent of state-funded primary schools, 77 per cent of state-funded secondary schools, and 38 per cent of state-funded special schools, were academies or free schools.[2] The majority were in multi-academy trusts, around half of which have three or fewer academies in them. In total, 52 per cent of pupils in state-funded schools in England are being educated in an academy or free school.

From a perspective of school standards there is little evidence that a move to a fully academised system, or a reversal of the programme and an end of academies, would have a positive impact on pupil outcomes.

The early sponsored academies (opened under the Labour government) demonstrated improvements equivalent to one grade in each of five GCSE subjects.[3] However, the impact of later sponsored academies was less conclusive with small improvements prior to opening (equivalent to one grade in one subject) continuing in the year after opening and then tailing off. Increases of one

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[1] Jon Andrews and Natalie Perera, '*Access to High Performing Schools in England*', (December 2017)
[2] Department for Education, '*Get information about schools*', 20th November 2019; Figures include studio schools and University Technical Colleges.
[3] Jon Andrews and Natalie Perera, '*The Impact of Academies on Educational Outcomes*', (July 2017)

grade in one subject were also seen in schools rated as 'outstanding' that became converter academies but there was no such increase seen in schools previously rated as 'good' or 'satisfactory'.

The differences between the highest and lowest performing multi-academy trusts and local authorities are far more significant – equivalent to around half a grade in each subject at GCSE – than the differences between academies and local authority schools as a whole.[4]

On average, free schools are currently the highest performing school group at GCSE. But there is important context to that performance. Secondary free schools are disproportionately drawing from neighbourhood types – in terms of demographics, employment, housing, household composition, and economic factors – from which pupils, on average, perform well. Pupils in free schools identified as top-performing are almost twice as likely as other pupils to live in these highest performing neighbourhood types.[5]

Taken as a whole, neither a move to a fully academised system, nor a return to a system of local authority oversight (for the vast majority of schools), is likely to lead to an increase in school standards by itself.

Creating new school places

The population bulge which began early in the new millennium has also created an ongoing pressure to create additional school places. Whilst the effects of this bulge have now been fully felt in primary schools – in fact, the primary aged population is projected to fall slightly over the next decade – the secondary aged population is set to increase. In 2018, the number of pupils in state-funded secondary schools was 2.85m, and is expected to reach 3.27m by 2027, an increase of 14.7 per cent or over 400,000 additional pupils.[6]

Free schools are the now the primary route by which new schools are created, though the majority of new places occurs in existing schools. Primary free school places continue to be created where there is a need for more school places, but this is less the case for secondary free schools. Both primary and secondary free schools are also being set up in areas where there is already an excess in school capacity. The creation of places has not necessarily been directed towards areas in need of more high-quality schools.[7]

Class sizes

Infant (Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1) class sizes have a statutory limit of 30 pupils, though there are a number of exceptions that allow this limit to be exceeded such as in the case of twins, children who were previously looked after by the local authority, and children of armed forces personnel who were admitted outside of the normal admissions round.[8] There are no statutory limits for older primary aged pupils (Key Stage 2, typically aged 7 to 11) or pupils of secondary school age.

Figure 5.1 shows the trends in primary school class sizes between 2006 and 2019. While primary school class sizes have now stabilised (27.1 in January 2019), they continue to increase in secondary

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[4] Jon Andrews, '*School performance in academy chains and local authorities – 2017*', (June 2018)
[5] Bobbie Mills, Emily Hunt and Jon Andrews, '*Free schools in England: 2019 report*', (October 2019)
[6] Department for Education, *'National pupil projections: July 2018 (2019 update)'*, (July 2019)
[7] Bobbie Mills, Emily Hunt and Jon Andrews, '*Free schools in England: 2019 report*', (October 2019)
[8] The School Admissions (Infant Class Sizes) (England) Regulations 2012

schools – 21.7, up from 20.1 in 2015.[9] The percentage of infant classes that exceed 30 pupils has been falling since 2015, from 5.4 per cent to 3.9 per cent, but this is still double the percentage in 2010. England's class sizes are also high by international standards. The average primary school class across the OECD is 21 pupils.[10]

Figure 5.1: Percentage of primary school classes by size of class and average class size, 2006 to 2019[11]
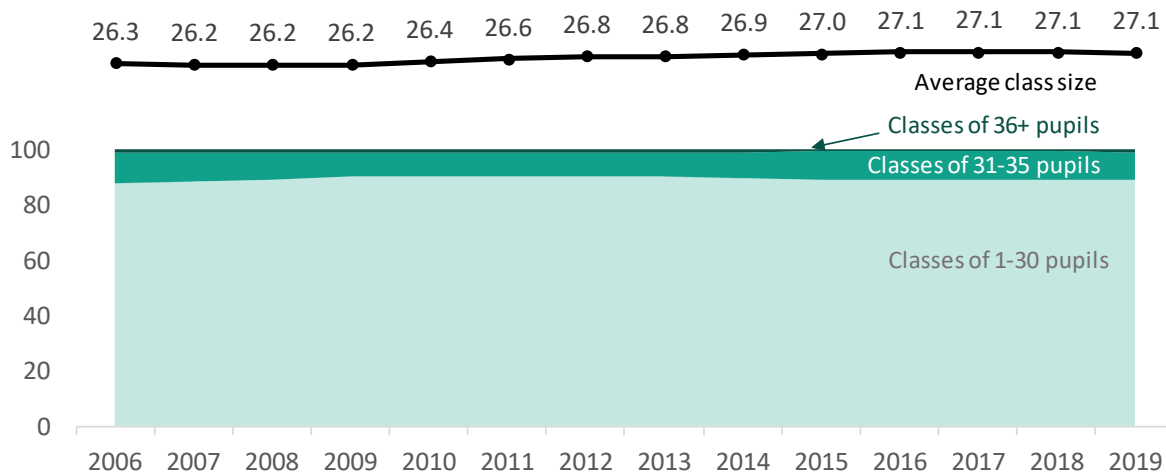
Grammar schools

Any expansion in the number of grammar school places – either through the opening of new selective schools, or the expansion of existing schools – is likely to have negative effects on the attainment of disadvantaged pupils.[12]

Pupils who are eligible for free school meals (FSM), a proxy for disadvantage, are under-represented in grammar schools. Only 2.5 per cent of grammar school pupils are entitled to FSM, compared with an average of 13.2 per cent in all state funded secondary schools. A main cause of this significant under-representation of disadvantaged pupils in grammar schools is that, by the time the '11 Plus' entry exam (or equivalent) is taken, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are 9 months of learning behind their peers.

Attainment in selective areas is characterised as providing small gains for those that attend grammar schools, and attainment penalties for those that do not. Our modelling suggests that further expansion in selective school places would result in smaller gains for grammar school pupils and larger losses for those not attending selective schools – losses which will be greatest amongst poor children.

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[9] Department for Education, '*Schools pupils and their characteristics: January 2019*', (June 2019)
[10] OECD, '*Education at a glance 2019*', (September 2019)
[11] Department for Education, '*Schools pupils and their characteristics: January 2019*', (June 2019)
[12] Jon Andrews, Jo Hutchinson & Rebecca Johnes, '*Grammar schools and social mobility*', (September 2016)

Special schools

Whilst access to high quality mainstream schools remains inequitable, access to specialist provision can be more challenging still. Pupils with SEND have to travel further to reach any special school.[13] In cities, the average pupil at an urban special school travels around 4 miles each way. In rural areas the average travel distance is 10 miles each way. In the most rural areas in England, the figure is even more striking – with around one in ten special school pupils having to travel over 23 miles one way just to get to school. Overall, pupils in special schools are, on average, travelling around three times as far as pupils in mainstream schools.

School admissions

The likelihood of families getting their first choice of secondary school has been falling in recent years. Around 1 in 20 pupils were offered a school in 2019 that they did not even apply to. This reflects rising demand for secondary places.[14]

White British families are more likely than Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) families to get offered their first choice of secondary school, and these ethnic gaps are only partly explained by where people live (with higher competition for places in more ethnically diverse, urban areas).[15] Pupils with English as their first (as opposed to an additional) language are also much more likely to get offered their first choice, as are (to a lesser extent) better off pupils relative to their peers eligible for the Pupil Premium.

What should a new government do?

- **Do not rely on large scale structural reform for the purposes of raising standards.** If the objective is to raise attainment, there is no strong evidence for a move to a fully academised system, nor is there such evidence for a return to a largely local authority based system. Analysis shows that there are strong and weak performers in both school types.
- **Do not expand the number of grammar schools or grammar school places.** The evidence is clear that a concentration of selective school places is associated with attainment losses for those that do not attend and these are disproportionately pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The penalties increase as the number of selective school places increases.
- **Conduct a review of the school admissions system.** The current system, through both applications and through appeals and waiting lists, is perpetuating inequalities in access to good schools, and increasing social segregation. Such a review should consider catchment areas and banding.
- **Consider all pupils when planning access to good school places.** Over 100,000 pupils attend England's special schools and they are frequently struggling to access specialist provision with excessive journeys to and from school.

Manifesto commitments

As in the 2017 General Election, structural reforms feature in manifesto commitments with approaches ranging from the continued expansion of the academies and free schools programme to

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[13] Jon Andrews, '*Access to special schools in England*', (March 2018)

[14] Department for Education, '*Secondary and primary school application and offers: 2019*', (June 2019)

[15] Emily Hunt, '*Secondary school choice in England*', (September 2018)

its complete reversal. Private schools also come under the spotlight with plans to remove their charitable status and charge VAT on fees, and a signalling of longer-term aspirations to integrate private schools into the state system. There are also calls to improve access and quality of provision for those with special educational needs and disabilities. While parental choice remains an important feature of the school system in England, no parties are suggesting any reforms to the admissions system.

Academies and free schools

The Green Party are proposing the most significant reform with an end to the academies and free schools programme and a complete return to local authority oversight. As set out above, this is unlikely to lead to an overall increase in standards. An end of the academies programme would also mean that there are likely to be cases where schools are moved from high performing academy trusts, to low performing local authorities.

The Labour Party would move control over school budgets away from academy trusts so that they are managed by individual schools and schools would be overseen by a governing body with elected representatives. Local authorities would also be able to establish new schools themselves – a change from the current policy where it is assumed that all new schools are free schools managed by an academy trust. The manifesto appears to stop short of returning academies to being maintained by a local authority, but a much greater degree of local authority oversight seems to be envisaged and a greater consistency of curriculum policy between and academies and local authority maintained schools.

Similarly, the Liberal Democrats propose a move in which the local authority would have a strategic oversight role over schools but the model of both academies and local authority maintained schools would remain.

The intention of both the Labour, and to a much lesser extent the Liberal Democrats, would appear to be to weaken the role of multi-academy trusts by removing their direct control over schools and moving to a model closer to that of a 'weak' federation of schools or even a local authority maintained community school. Their aim would be to make schools more accountable to their local communities, rather than large trusts. Within this context it is important to recognise that the vast majority of academy trusts are actually small – around 85 per cent have five or fewer schools and these account for around 45 per cent of all academies.

Reforms of this kind could also limit the capacity of multi-academy trusts to achieve economies of scale across their schools and manage resources effectively. Data from 2016-17 show that the propensity to have an in-year deficit – i.e. for a school to be spending more than its income - was lower in academies in multi-academy trusts than for local authority schools.[16] This could be because of the ability of academy trusts to move part of their budgets between schools. There is also emerging evidence that multi-academy trusts are playing an increasing role in the development of new teachers with a higher proportion of new entrants, and faster progression to middle-leadership roles than in other state-funded schools.[17]

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[16] Jon Andrews, '*School revenue balances in England*', (January 2019)
[17] Jon Andrews, '*Teacher recruitment, retention and progression in multi-academy trusts*', (January 2019)

The Brexit Party have proposed that the expansion of the academies and free schools programme should continue, as academies and free schools "have improved results". However, as set out above, there is little evidence to suggest that this is the case, at a system level.[18]

The Conservative Party has proposed a continuation of the academies programme though are some way off previous commitments of wanting to deliver a fully academised school system over the course of a parliament. They have also re-signalled their intention to open 200 new free schools in the coming years. They would also continue to intervene in schools where there is entrenched underperformance – suggesting that forced academisation for underperforming schools will remain (the Education and Adoption Act 2015 requires the Secretary of State to issue an academy order if a school is rated as inadequate by Ofsted).

None of the party manifestos that have proposed reforms to school structures have at this stage set out how they would increase, or in some cases restore, capacity in local authorities in order to deliver the functions that they are proposing – beyond admissions which is largely managed by local authorities now anyway even if the academy trust is the 'admissions authority'. In around one in five local authorities over 70 per cent of pupils are already educated in academies, meaning that the amount of funding that authorities have been able to 'top-slice' for central services has been reduced.

Selective schools

Despite featuring prominently in the 2017 General Election (following the government consultation 'Schools that work for everyone' the previous year), selective or grammar schools are less of an issue in the 2019 election. They are not mentioned by the Labour Party, the Green Party, or the Brexit Party. The Liberal Democrats say that they would oppose any future expansion.

The Conservative Party do not make any explicit commitment (either for or against academic selection), but appear to at least be leaving the door open to a future expansion by the inclusion of a broad statement to "ensure that parents can choose the schools that best suit their children and best prepare them for the future." It may therefore be the case that in government they would seek expansion either by introducing legislation to allow new grammar schools, or through the current policy of allowing existing schools to grow and to set up 'satellite' schools. The evidence would strongly suggest that this would be detrimental to social mobility, particularly if expansion occurs where there is already a high density of grammar school places. These challenges are not unique to establishing new grammar schools, but also apply to the expansion of existing schools, and the use of quotas for admissions.[19]

School places and class sizes

The Liberal Democrats include a commitment to reduce class sizes, though they do not specify the age range that would be included or the scale of any reduction. The Labour Party have committed to reducing class sizes in primary schools to a maximum of 30 – though there is no commitment to any further legislation nor is it clear whether the existing exceptions would apply and if they did, whether they would be extended to all primary aged pupils.

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[18] Jon Andrews and Natalie Perera, '*The impact of academies on educational outcomes'*, (July 2017)

[19] Jon Andrews, Jo Hutchinson and Rebecca Johnes, *'Grammar schools and social mobility'*, (December 2016)

In 2019, 10.9 per cent of primary school classes in England had more than 30 pupils – 2,378 classes at Key Stage 1 and 12,423 classes at Key Stage 2 exceeded this threshold. A very simplistic approach is to assume that the ambition of all classes being 30 pupils or fewer would be met if places were created for all those pupils in excess of this threshold – in total an additional 26,000 places. This would come at a cost of around £300m in capital expenditure for the creation of new school places, and ongoing teacher costs of around £40m per year.[20] However, this is an incredibly conservative estimate as it assumes that all pupils in 'oversized' classes can be redistributed with perfect efficiency – i.e. to make classes with 30 pupils. In practice, it is far more likely that spare capacity would be created in the system, incurring significantly higher costs.

The Green Party have the most ambitious target of reducing class sizes to under 20, though this is framed as a long-term ambition and therefore unlikely to be one that they would seek to deliver over the course of one parliament.

Existing research also suggests that reducing class sizes has only weak impacts on attainment, and noticeable impacts only tend to be found for large reductions. Whilst the effects appear greater in the early years of school, they have been found to diminish over time, and are modest compared to the cost.[21]

The number of secondary aged pupils is projected to increase by 11 per cent over the duration of the next parliament. The majority of new school places come from the expansion of existing schools, but new provision schools, which are currently largely free schools, will also provide new places. However, in recent years the free schools programme at secondary level has not necessarily been targeted at areas in need of new school places.[22]

Private schools

Both the Labour Party and the Green Party would charge VAT on private school fees. The Labour Party would also use their Social Justice Commission to consider how to integrate private schools into the state sector over the longer term.

Increasing fees for private schools is likely to lead to an increase in the number of pupils in state-funded schools. The Labour Party costings document estimates that around 5 per cent of privately educated pupils would join the state-funded system. This is based on IFS analysis of the elasticity of demand for private schooling, though we would advise caution about applying these estimates without testing for robustness against such a large increase in fees (of up to 20 per cent).[23]

In January 2019 there were 570,000 pupils (FTE) being educated in independent schools in England.[24] Therefore, the Labour Party are estimating that an additional 28,000 school places would be required. In 2019-20 average per pupil funding was £4,645 implying an additional cost of around

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[20] Broad estimate based on the average salary of a primary school teacher of £34,700 (derived from DfE *'School workforce in England: November 2018'*, June 2019), uprated by 2.75 per cent to reflect increases in 2019-20, on-costs of 26 per cent, and capital cost of a place of £10,900 from NAO *'Capital funding for schools'* uprated to 2019-20 prices.

[21] Department for Education, *'Class size and education in England evidence report'*, (December 2011)

[22] Bobbie Mills, Emily Hunt and Jon Andrews, *'Free schools in England: 2019 report'*, (October 2019)

[23] Institute for Fiscal Studies, *'The demand for private schooling in England: the impact of price and quality'*, (September 2010)

[24] Department for Education, '*Schools pupils and their characteristics: January 2019*', (June 2019)

£130m. While such a volume of pupils is well within the normal fluctuations of pupil numbers at a national level, at a local level it might create additional pressure on school places – particularly if schools are forced to close. It is also possible that some private schools might cushion the impact of fees by reducing spending on bursaries and scholarships, reducing access for some middle and lower income groups.

Specialist provision

There are 1.3m pupils with an identified special educational need at state-funded schools in England.[25] 271,000 have an education, health and care plan (or statement of need) and 121,000 attend state-funded special schools.

Beyond commitments to additional funding by the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats, the policy details about pupils with special educational needs and disabilities by the three main parties is limited. The Liberal Democrats discuss them within the context of the role of local authorities, and the Conservative Party say that they will create more places for those with complex needs. This is likely to be as part of the free schools programme.

There are currently only 34 special free schools, fewer than half of which have been inspected by Ofsted, so it is difficult to judge whether this will result in high quality provision for these pupils. Of those that have been inspected, special free schools are less likely to be rated as outstanding, and more likely to be rated as inadequate, than other special schools.[26]

The Green Party set out an objective for more pupils to be able to access local schools while retaining the option to attend a special school if that is what is wanted. The objective includes improving access to buildings, an 'inclusive curriculum', and more specially trained teachers. This would address the concern that pupils with complex special educational needs frequently do not have access to a local school that meets their needs, travelling on average three times as far as pupils who attend mainstream schools. However, the manifesto lacks any detail on how this would be achieved or how it would be funded.

The Conservative Party also commit to the expansion of alternative provision for 'pupils who have been excluded'. Such expansion should not override the default position that mainstream schooling is the expected setting unless the child's best interests are met more effectively in specialist provision. The Labour Party aim to increase regulation of alternative provision.

Overall assessment

None of the parties have presented an evidence-based suite of policies that will improve access to good school places and address inequalities of access across the country.

The research evidence suggests that large scale structural reform is unlikely to have a significant impact – positive or negative – on pupil outcomes. While the Conservative Party support the ongoing expansion of academies and free schools they are perhaps less vocal than they have been in the past, particularly on the former. The Labour Party and Liberal Democrats would reduce the powers of multi-academy trusts but appear to have stopped some way short of abandoning

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[25] Department for Education, *'Special educational needs in England, 2019'*, (July 2019)
[26] Bobbie Mills, Emily Hunt and Jon Andrews, *'Free schools in England: 2019 report'*, (October 2019)

academies altogether. It is the Green Party that are proposing the largest changes, calling for academies to return to local authority control.

Such an approach represents a significant suite of reforms for unknown, and unproven gains. They would also attract significant cost and capacity demands in both central and local government.

Grammar schools have not been the significant factor they were in manifestos in 2017, however there are indications that the Conservative Party would retain the option of expansion without saying so explicitly. The Liberal Democrats have ruled out any support for such an expansion.

Commitments on providing places for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities are somewhat limited. While most parties have discussed additional funding for these pupils there is a paucity of other policy and the Conservative Party's commitment to the expansion of alternative provision is framed as a mechanism for managing pupils who have been excluded rather than a setting that is necessarily in the child's best interests.