

Social Policy in a Cold Climate

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The Coalition's Record on Schools: Policy, Spending and Outcomes 2010-2015

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In May 2010, David Cameron and Nick Clegg committed the Coalition to sweeping school reforms, promising “*a breaking open of the state monopoly*”. They also pledged to protect school spending and give extra money to the education of the poorest pupils.

- The Coalition did protect school spending. Total expenditure rose from £46.1bn in 2009/10 to £46.6bn in 2013/14 (in real terms in 2009/10 prices) – a rise of one per cent. This allowed pupil-teacher and pupil-adult ratios to be maintained. But capital spending fell by 57 per cent.
- The Pupil Premium has directed more money to schools with poor intakes. Secondary schools with the highest proportions of pupils from low income families gained an extra 4.3 per cent funding in 2012/13 than in 2009/10, while the least deprived schools lost 2.5 per cent. All types of primary schools gained, especially the most deprived.
- The Coalition has broken up local authority oversight of the state school system. By 2014, 57 per cent of secondary schools and one in ten primary schools were Academies.
- There is no clear evidence to date that Academies are either better or worse than the schools they replaced. Ways of managing the new fragmented system are still evolving and will be a key challenge for the next government.
- Other reforms have included changes to curriculum and assessment to make them more demanding. Teacher training has been reformed to emphasise school-led, ‘on-the-job’ training.
- Results from primary school testing and GCSE exams continued to rise until 2013. However in 2014 GCSE attainment fell, and socio-economic gaps opened up for lower attainers.

The next government will inherit a school system in flux and key issues of equity and achievement still unresolved.

The Coalition's aims and goals

Like its Labour predecessor, the Coalition between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats aimed to increase educational standards and reduce educational inequalities, creating “*a highly educated society in which opportunity is equal for children and young people, no matter what their background or family circumstances*”. According to the 2010 coalition agreement, greater social mobility was to be achieved by providing extra money for the education of children from poorer homes so they “*get to go to the best schools, not the worst*”.

Besides this extra funding, the Coalition argued that the best way to achieve higher standards and greater equality was to reform the education system, breaking up the “state monopoly” and allowing more providers to enter the market. They wanted parents and community groups to be able to set up new schools. These goals were part of the Coalition’s wider vision of achieving a stronger society and a smaller state.

Before the election, the Coalition parties had disagreed on key issues concerning curriculum and assessment. The Conservatives wanted more a more challenging curriculum, based around ‘traditional’ subjects, and more rigorous testing. The Liberal Democrats wanted fewer tests, a slimmer national curriculum and a streamlined diploma combining GCSEs, A levels and vocational education. No commitments on curriculum and assessment were included in the Coalition’s original programme for government.

Policies

The first change made by the Coalition was to create a Department for Education (DfE) in place of the Department for Children, Schools and Families. This signalled a move towards a tighter focus on academic achievement, in contrast to the previous government’s emphasis on advancing a wider range of children’s outcomes through multi-agency work (such as the Every Child Matters programme).

The new government went on to make rapid and far-reaching changes to the education system, including a programme of radical curriculum and assessment reform that was not trailed in its programme for government. One consequence was that English schools policy (controlled from Westminster) diverged increasingly from policies pursued by the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales.

The School System

The Coalition radically reformed the school system in England. Labour’s Academy programme had targeted struggling secondary schools in deprived areas. The Coalition extended the possibility of Academy status to any secondary or primary school that Ofsted had rated ‘outstanding’ or ‘good’. It aimed for a system of autonomous, independent schools run by many different providers. ‘Free Schools’ set up by parents, teachers, faith groups and others were also introduced with direct government funding, as were ‘Studio Schools’, providing a mixed academic and vocational curriculum at secondary level and ‘University Technical Colleges’ for 14 to 19-year olds.

None of these schools are obliged to follow the national curriculum. They have greater flexibility than local authority schools over the school day and term lengths, and they have control over teachers’ pay and conditions. They can also employ unqualified teachers.

The pace of change is indicated by the fact that in 2010, just over half of state-funded secondary schools were run by local authorities and just 6 per cent were Academies. By 2014, a little over a fifth of secondaries were under local authority control, and over half (57 per cent) were Academies. About one in ten primary schools had become Academies by 2014. These policies were not pursued in the rest of the UK.

The government also changed the inspection regime to make it narrower and tougher. Ofsted inspectors were asked to focus on just four main issues: pupil achievement, the quality of teaching, leadership and management, and the behaviour and safety of pupils. In addition, from 2012, schools could no longer be graded 'satisfactory'. If neither 'good' or 'outstanding', they were deemed to 'require improvement'.

The Teaching Profession

The Coalition has also radically reformed the system for teacher training in England, putting on-the-job training led by schools at the heart of a new system. Schools were encouraged to provide Initial Teacher Training (ITT) through a new scheme, School Direct. The number of places in university-led ITT was reduced and only training institutions rated 'outstanding' were guaranteed a continuing role. The Coalition expanded Labour's 'Teach First' programme, recruiting high-achieving graduates direct from university.

By contrast with its decision to allow Academies and others to employ unqualified teachers, the Coalition made the entry requirements for teacher training more stringent. From 2012, new trainees were required to hold at least a second class honours degree. But it also introduced a 'Troops to Teachers' scheme, open to those without degrees.

Teacher' pay and conditions were reformed, bringing an end to automatic year-on-year pay rises and nationally standardised pay, while introducing performance-related pay based on annual appraisal.

Educational Inequality

In pursuit of its commitment to reduce social inequality in education the Coalition introduced a 'Pupil Premium', a per capita grant to schools and Academies for pupils eligible for Free School Meals. This replaced a number of wider school and area-based grants and programmes, such as extended schools, under Labour.

The Pupil Premium started at £430 per pupil, but the amount was increased rapidly each year. In 2014/15 the premium provided £1300 for primary school pupils and £935 for secondary students. Moreover, from 2012/13, schools received payment for any child on their rolls who had been eligible for FSM during the previous six years.

The Coalition introduced school-level measures of socio-economic gaps in school performance tables to strengthen accountability on this issue. It also required Ofsted to report on how well schools were targeting their Pupil Premium allocation on disadvantaged students, and made schools report on this on their websites. An Education Endowment Foundation was set up to identify 'what works' in supporting students from low-income families.

Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment

Far reaching reforms made to the subjects taught in schools and the way they are taught and assessed are being phased in. These reforms follow the Conservatives' preference for 'traditional' subjects and academic 'rigour' not the Liberal Democrats preference for reducing testing and introducing greater academic/vocational integration. Key reforms include.

- a new national curriculum for primary and secondary schools from 2014.
- a different baseline assessment during primary school reception year introduced to replace the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile from 2016.
- A new test (a phonics screening check) at the end of Year 1 (from 2012), plus new internally assessed tests for 7-year olds from 2016.
- A test in grammar, punctuation and spelling to be included in assessments of children at age 11 from 2016.
- A switch from 'modular' GCSEs that include coursework assessment, to 'linear' courses, assessed by final examination from 2014.
- An overhaul of GCSE programmes placing more emphasis on acquiring factual knowledge. Beginning with English and maths in 2015, all subjects will be affected by 2017.

A major change, from 2014, was that the number of vocational qualifications counting towards school performance tables was reduced, with changes made to the way they were counted. This was to ensure a focus on qualifications perceived as valuable by universities and employers. Children from low-income families had previously been more reliant on vocational qualifications to achieve expected levels of achievement. Schools were no longer allowed to include the results from exam 're-sits' in performance tables

How much did the Coalition spend?

Overall education spending in the UK, which also includes universities and further education, fell by £3.6bn (4 per cent) in real terms between 2009/10 and 2013/14. As a share of national income it was down from a high point of 6.2 per cent in 2009/10 to 5.5 per cent.

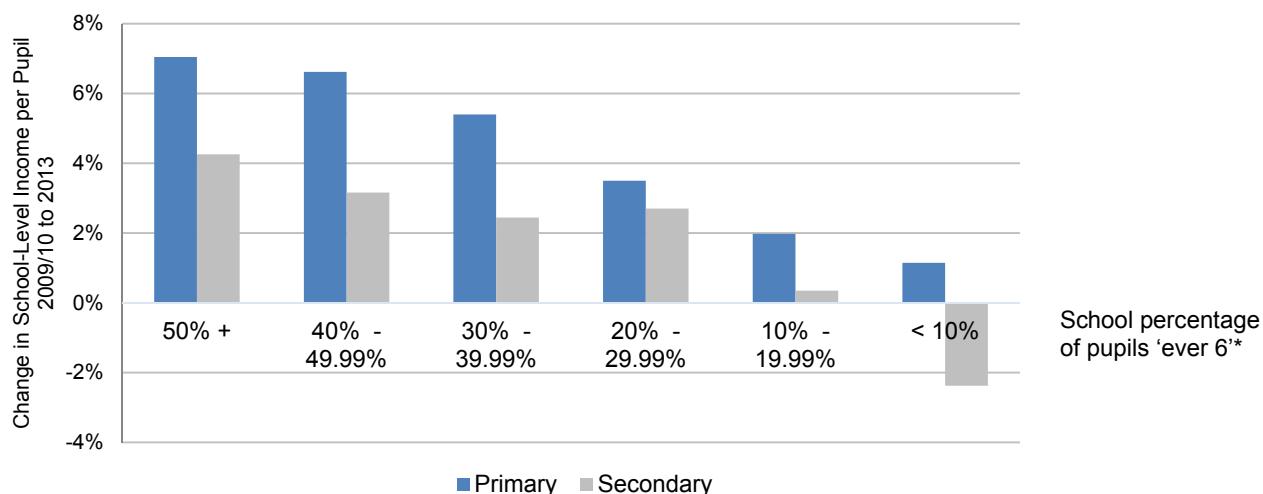
Nevertheless, at a time of widespread public spending cuts, the Coalition protected day-to-day spending on schools. Taken together, current and capital spending on schools in England rose by £0.5bn, from £46.1bn in 2009/10 to £46.6bn in 2013/14 – a rise of 1.1 per cent. But while capital spending fell by 57 per cent from £6.5bn to £2.8bn, current spending grew by 11 per cent from £39.5bn to £43.8bn.

School funding was already loaded towards schools with the most deprived pupils. The Coalition's new Pupil Premium has benefited these schools even more (Figure 1). Up until 2012/13, the least deprived secondary schools experienced real terms losses in funding of around 2.5 per cent, while the most deprived received real terms increases of around 4.3 per cent. Primary schools with the least deprived pupils saw their grants increase by 1.1 per cent over the same period, but the most deprived schools enjoyed a larger 7 per cent increase. These patterns should look more marked when more recent data is available, because the Pupil Premium increased in value year-on-year.

An important point, however, is that the Pupil Premium (like previous schemes targeted on disadvantage) is a small part of the system. It only accounted for 2 per cent of overall school spending in 2012/13. The

outcomes of disadvantaged children, relative to others, are much more likely to be affected by their access to good schools and teachers and all the mainstream activities of schools, as well as by poverty and disadvantage itself.

Figure 1: Schools with a higher percentage of pupils from low income families saw bigger increases in funding 2009/10 to 2012/13



Source: Performance tables data, 2009/10 and 2012/13.

Schools were categorised into 6 bands by the percentage of children eligible for free school meals in the last 6 years (known as ever 6) in 2012/13. The data is for maintained schools only not including Academies.

Effects of policies and spending on the school system

The protection extended to school spending meant that system resources were generally maintained.

A combination of lower capital spending and rising numbers of primary-age children contributed to an increase in the ratio of pupils to schools. In 2014, 37 per cent of primary school pupils attended schools with rolls of 400 or more, compared with 25 per cent in 2010. However, the ratio of secondary school pupils to schools fell. As a result, class sizes in primary schools were at their highest level since the turn of the century, while those in secondary schools were at their lowest.

There was little change in the size of the school workforce between 2010 and 2013 (latest data). Full-time equivalent (FTE) teacher numbers increased by one per cent (after an initial fall in 2010-11), and FTE regular teaching assistants by 14 per cent. The one per cent growth in teacher numbers was slightly less than the increase in pupils (2 per cent), but the total workforce deployed in classrooms grew by more (5 per cent).

As a result there has been little change in pupil-teacher ratios to date. But concerns have been raised about the future supply of teachers, in the face of rising demand. Recruitment difficulties have emerged in science, technology and maths, while the percentage of lessons taught by teachers with a relevant qualification fell in all subjects between 2010 to 2013 (88.4 to 84.8 in English, 83.6 to 82.7 per cent in maths and 89.1 to 87.6 in science). As well as the increasing attractiveness of other professions as the economy returns to growth, under-recruitment of trainee teachers by the new School Direct programme, reforms to teachers' pay and falling morale are among factors that have been implicated in potential shortages. Qualified teachers, meanwhile, still account for 96 per cent of the profession in schools.

According to Ofsted, the quality of schools has improved. In 2014, 81 per cent were rated 'good' or 'outstanding' compared with 66 per cent in 2009. However, the proportion of secondary schools rated 'inadequate' has also risen, from 3 per cent to 6 per cent, and from 5 to 11 per cent in the most deprived fifth of areas. The proportion of secondary schools rated as having 'inadequate' leadership is also rising and almost doubled between 2012 and 2014.

Firm conclusions cannot yet be drawn about the effect of the Academies programme. A House of Commons Committee concluded that “it is too early to judge whether academies raise standards overall or for disadvantaged children”, while the independent Academies Commission found the evidence “does not suggest that improvement across all academies has been strong enough to transform the life chances of children from the poorest families”. High profile cases of poor performance and financial irregularities at some Academies between 2012 and 2014 led the government to put stronger accountability measures in place. Nevertheless the National Audit Office and two House of Commons committees have subsequently called for greater scrutiny and support. Managing the new system effectively will be a key challenge for the next government.

Effects on academic attainment

Overall attainment rose until 2013 then fell at GCSE

Up until 2013, attainment at most levels continued its general upward trend, as might be expected given continuity in spending and in school accountability regimes.

Improvements at the end of primary school continued in 2014. However at GCSE, results fell in 2014. Figure 2 shows the headline results, with a drop of 17.5 percentage points in the proportion passing 5 GCSEs at A*-C (from 83 per cent to 65.5 per cent), and 4 points when English and maths are included (5 A*-CEM) (from 60.6 per cent to 56.6 per cent).

Most of this change is accounted for by changes to the school performance tables, which have reduced the number and value of vocational qualifications and only count students' first attempts at an exam. However, attainment has fallen even when this is taken into account - by around 5 percentage points for the 5 A*-C measure and 0.3 percentage points for 5 A*-CEM. These results could be explained by schools' reactions to the new system, for example putting students in for academic subjects or reducing early entries. They could also be due to the new assessment regime, with less coursework and most of the marks coming from the final exam, as well as the removal of speaking and listening component of the English grade. Lower attaining students who struggle to get 5 A*-C have been most affected.

Some socio-economic gaps have widened again

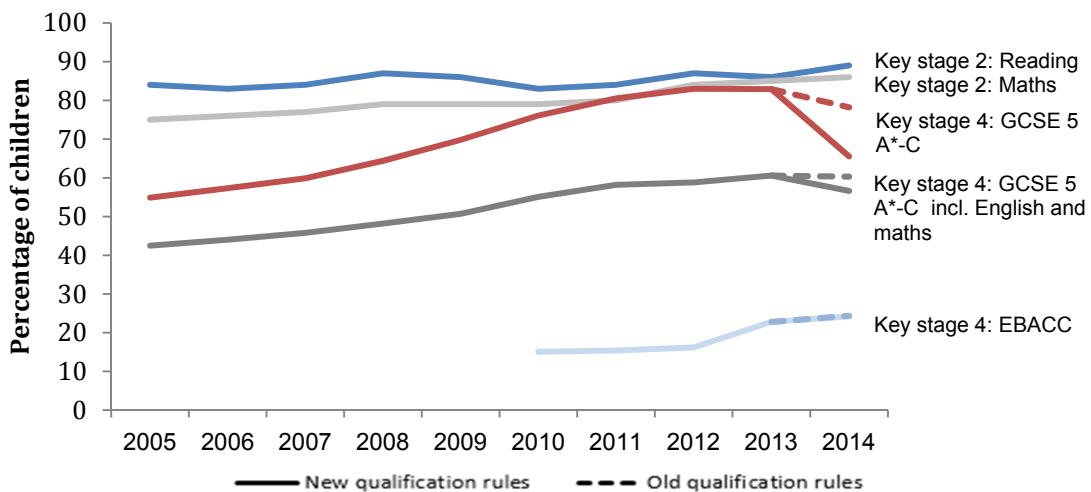
Until 2013, the attainment of pupils eligible for Free School Meals improved in every year after 2009/10, continuing the trend under Labour (Figure 2). In 2011-12 there was a notable jump in achievement assessed by Key Stage 2 maths tests at the end of primary school. However, the continuing trend does not suggest that there has been any additional 'Pupil Premium effect'.

In 2014, it was lower attaining students on Free School Meals who had the largest dip in their achievements. Using the new counting rules, at the 5 A*-C level the attainment of students on FSM fell 27.7 percentage points. For white boys on FSM it went down 29.2 percentage points (from 64.8 per cent to 35.6 per cent), and for children with Special Educational Needs on FSM by 32.8 percentage points (from 49.4 per cent to

16.6 per cent). This widened the FSM/non-FSM gap from 16 to 28 percentage points. The changes were much smaller at 5 A*-C with English and maths, where the gap rose from 26.7 to 27 points (Figure 3).

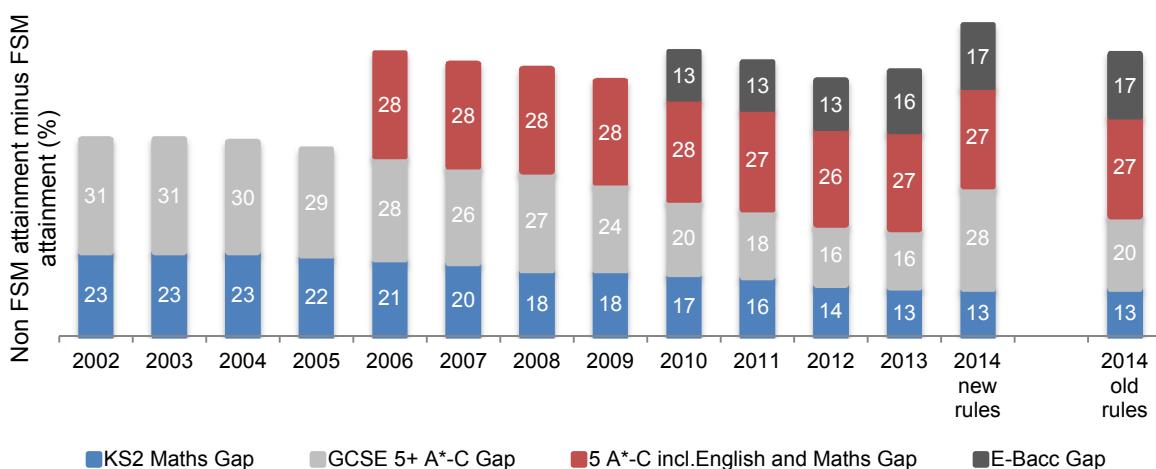
When a like-for-like comparison is made using the old method of counting qualifications, the gap increased less - from 16 to 19.8 percentage points at 5 A*-C, and by 0.5 percentage points with English and maths included (also shown in Figure 3). Further analysis is needed to determine whether this is due to differential effects of the changes to GCSEs or to factors outside the school including rising child poverty since 2013.

Figure 2: GCSE results dipped in 2014, especially for lower attaining pupils



Sources: Department for Education SFR 50 2014 (KS2) and SFR 02 2015 (KS4)

Figure 3: Gap between Non FSM & FSM key attainment measures 2002 – 2013



Sources: Department for Education SFR 50 (2014) and author's analysis from the NPD (KS2) and SFR 05 (2014), Lupton and Obolenskaya (2013), SFR 06 2015 (KS4). Note: Data are for all pupils in state-funded schools. There is no consistent time series for KS2 reading by FSM status so that is not included here.

Conclusions

At a time of austerity, the Coalition has protected day-to-day spending on schools. Through its Pupil Premium, it has also shifted more resources to schools serving children from disadvantaged families in a way that has become more pronounced as its value increased. At a time when other spending cuts have disproportionately affected poorer households, these policies stand out for their progressive intent.

At the same time, the Coalition's school reforms have been exceptional in their speed and scale. By 2014 more than half of state secondary schools were Academies, thus the Coalition has already achieved its aim of breaking up the 'monopoly' of state schools. The system for training teachers has been partially devolved to schools. These new systems are still evolving and any new government will face immediate challenges over how to manage a fragmented system effectively. There are emerging concerns about school quality and accountability, as well signs of a teacher supply problem. It will be a long time before it can be determined whether this new system is better or worse for children, and whether it is more or less equitable. No clear evidence has emerged to date.

What is taught, the way it is assessed and the way that schools are held accountable for their performance are all also in the process of being transformed. There has been a striking policy shift towards a narrower education agenda, including a more traditional curriculum and assessment through final exams.

The 2014 GCSE results were the first to show the effect of some of the Coalition's policy changes. Although attainment levels remain higher than when the government took over, and progress has continued in primary schools, the fact that the GCSE results show a fall in attainment and a widening of the socio-economic gap for lower attaining learners in particular is a worrying development given the government's concern with reducing educational inequality and its policy efforts in that direction.

Whichever government is elected in May 2015 faces much the same situation in terms of socio-economic inequalities as the Coalition did when it took power in 2010, as well as a school system in flux. The continued protection of school funding cannot necessarily be guaranteed. In this situation, system management challenges may well be the new government's first priority, but bigger questions about outcomes and equity remain to be resolved.

Further Information

The full version of this paper *The Coalition's Record on Schools: Policy, Spending and Outcomes 2010-2015*, is available at <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spcc/WP13.pdf>. This is one of a series of papers produced as part of CASE's research programme *Social Policy in a Cold Climate* (SPCC). The research, concluded in 2015, examines the effects of the major economic and political changes in the UK since 2007, focusing on the distribution of wealth, poverty, inequality and social mobility.

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