



Research published by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has found that free schools are lacking in the innovative approaches they were created for – and that disadvantaged students are not benefiting as much as they should

According to *Free For All? Analysing free schools in England, 2018* – a recent report published by NFER – free schools are failing to fulfil their original purpose of offering innovative and parent-led approaches to the curriculum. The programme was introduced in 2010 to bring new and innovative providers – including parents – into a different type of school system, one that could be autonomous and self-improving.

However, the report has found that only a third of established free schools have demonstrated a novel approach. Just 35% of the 152 primary open free schools in England were found to be innovative in their approach, a percentage which drops to 29% for open secondary free schools.

A COMMUNITY APPROACH

The free schools programme was also meant to encourage groups of parents to set up schools in their communities; however, only one in five free schools has had parents involved in their inception, and the number of parent-led free schools has fallen over time. The majority of secondary free schools have since involved a multi-academy trust in their establishment; overall, 178 free schools have now been set up by academy trusts

– this is more than half of all free schools.

Sir Peter Lampl, founder of the Sutton Trust, commented: “Free schools were supposed to bring new and innovative providers into the education sector, to drive up standards and improve school choice. But, as our research shows, very few are fulfilling that original purpose.

“Our research finds that, while free schools are often located in disadvantaged areas, both primary and secondary free schools have lower proportions of disadvantaged pupils than their catchment areas. This is unacceptable. Free schools need to make serious efforts to recruit more students from disadvantaged backgrounds.”

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Carole Willis, chief executive of the National Foundation for Educational Research, added: “This report shows that the government’s free schools programme has not been very successful at bringing innovation to the education systems and encouraging more parents and teachers to set up new schools.

“What it does highlight is that those new free schools that are opening are increasingly set up and led by multi-academy trusts and are used as a way to meet rising pupil numbers. So, if the government is still committed to the programme’s original purpose, then it should review and clarify the mission of free schools.” ■