

Academy chains fail poorer pupils

Rosemary Bennett Education Editor

Disadvantaged pupils are being let down by two thirds of academy chains where they get worse GCSE results than children of similar backgrounds in other types of schools, a study suggests.

The analysis found poorer pupils struggled in 38 of 58 chains, while those in 12 achieved above the national average on key measures of attainment. Of these, three — City of London Academies Trust, Diocese of London and the Harris Federation — were significantly above the average.

The findings are a setback for the government, which has championed the academies programme as a way to raise attainment for disadvantaged children. Academies are free from the control of local authorities and have considerable autonomy over everything from admissions to budgets.

The research by Merryn Hutchings and Becky Francis for the Sutton Trust, the educational charity, looked at the performance over five years of children entitled to the pupil premium, the extra funding for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

They say that their findings suggest Regional Schools Commissioners, who are responsible for underperforming academies, are having little success in bringing about improvement.

A few chains, such as the Grace Foundation in the Midlands, have shown consistent year-on-year improvement in the ranking. Others have fallen, fluctuated or plateaued.

At the top end, Diocese of London saw 60 per cent of disadvantaged pupils

achieve Grade C or 4 in English and maths. At the other end, Bright Futures in the northwest saw fewer than 30 per cent of disadvantaged pupils get GCSEs in maths and English, although the proportion is higher than two years ago. At Midland Academies Trust, the figure is just over 20 per cent. The national average for poorer children is about 45 per cent.

The report says some chains are entering a large number of pupils for GCSEs in the EBacc suite of subjects, which helps boost their league table ranking. This requires pupils to take English, maths, a language, science and history or geography. “Unnecessarily entering students for this optional qualification who are unlikely to succeed can be harmful,” the researchers said.

Defenders of the Ebacc system say that it is crucial disadvantaged children study as many core subjects as possible, rather than be funnelled into less demanding, marginal subjects.

The report says long-standing academy chains are showing better exam results, with newer chains frequently performing poorly.

Professor Francis said: “We continue to find it perplexing that the Government has done so little to explore the methods of these successful chains and to distil learning to support others.”

Mark Lehain, director of the campaign group Parents and Teachers for Excellence said that knowledge on how to run academies was improving.

The Department for Education said: “The growing number of successful multi-academy trusts is playing an important part in driving up standards.”