



BSF school report

B+ for attendance but C- for attainment

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The Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme was launched in 2004 by then prime minister Tony Blair, with the aim of rebuilding or refurbishing every secondary school in England over a 15 to 20 year period. Its cancellation was announced by Michael Gove earlier this year. Research by NFER found that in the first new school building to open, pupil attitudes to school and the school environment improved substantially. However, to date no research has been published on attendance and attainment outcomes for young people. This article reports research based on Partnerships for Schools' published list of completed BSF projects as of 21 July 2010 and the latest available version of the National Pupil Database. It suggests that whilst at this stage attainment at BSF schools is not yet improving at the rate possibly expected at the start of the programme, there are potentially some early signs of improved attendance.

Overview of BSF schools

The first BSF project opened in May 2006, and by July 2010 there were 186 completed school projects, over three quarters of which were new buildings or combined new buildings with refurbishment.

BSF projects have been carried out in a variety of schools, although our analysis focuses on mainstream secondary schools. We were able to match 140 of these to data on

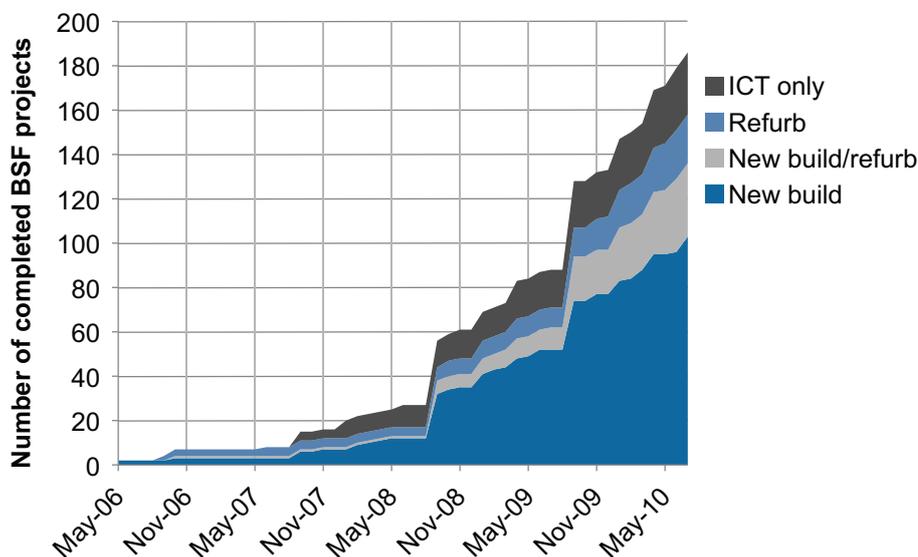
school characteristics. This serves to highlight how the programme has been targeted in more disadvantaged areas. 32 per cent of BSF schools are in the lowest fifth for achievement at key stage 4, and only 11 per cent are in the highest fifth. Furthermore, BSF schools are nearly three times more likely to be in the top fifth for percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals and to have more than 50 per cent of pupils with English as an additional language.

Attainment

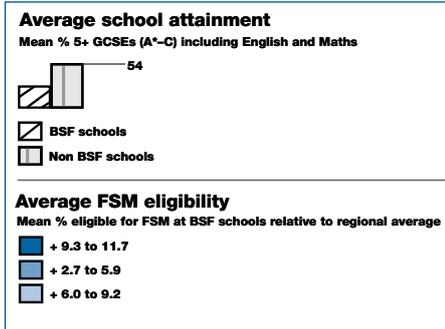
In order to investigate the impact Building Schools for the Future is having we used pupil data from the National Pupil Database to construct multilevel models of attainment. These allow us to compare how well GCSE pupils at BSF schools perform compared to pupils at non-BSF schools, taking into account prior attainment and a range of school- and pupil-level background characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, school type and eligibility for free school meals. The latest data available is for 2009, and so our models only considered BSF projects which had opened by April 2009 prior to when the GCSE examinations took place.

We considered a number of different model specifications, including controls for pupils prior attainment and the school's contextual value added (CVA) score for the previous year. This enabled us not only to consider whether pupils at BSF schools make more progress than other pupils, but also whether the rate of progress from one cohort to the next was showing more of an

Number of completed BSF projects



BSF schools have lower average attainment and more free school meal pupils



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improvement at BSF schools. We also investigated whether the type of project (new build, refurbishment, etc) or the year in which the project opened had an impact. However, in all cases our models showed that pupils at BSF schools make, on average, less progress than would be expected based on their in-take and past performance.

This is illustrated in the chart below, which shows the impact on average GCSE points score firstly across all BSF schools, and secondly for each type of project. The error bars show 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimates, and so any bar not crossing the axis indicates a statistically significant effect. These results show that even taking into account background characteristics, pupils at BSF schools attain a total GCSE points score on average 11 points lower than pupils at non-BSF schools, equivalent to almost two grades lower. The effect at the ICT-only schools is even greater, with pupils attaining 33 points less on average (over five grades), although this result relates to

just 2000 pupils from nine schools and so should be treated with some caution.

Attendance

Analysis of absence data involved the investigation of pupil level absence data for the year 11 and year 9 cohorts in the 2008/2009 academic year. Models were again constructed including a range of pupil characteristics and school-level indicators. An important difference to the attainment model was that we were unable to control for a pupil's 'prior absence'. However, we have included the school-level absence rates for the previous cohort of year 9/11 pupils, meaning that our models consider changes in absence rates between the 2007/08 and 2008/09 academic years – although this change is not pupil to pupil.

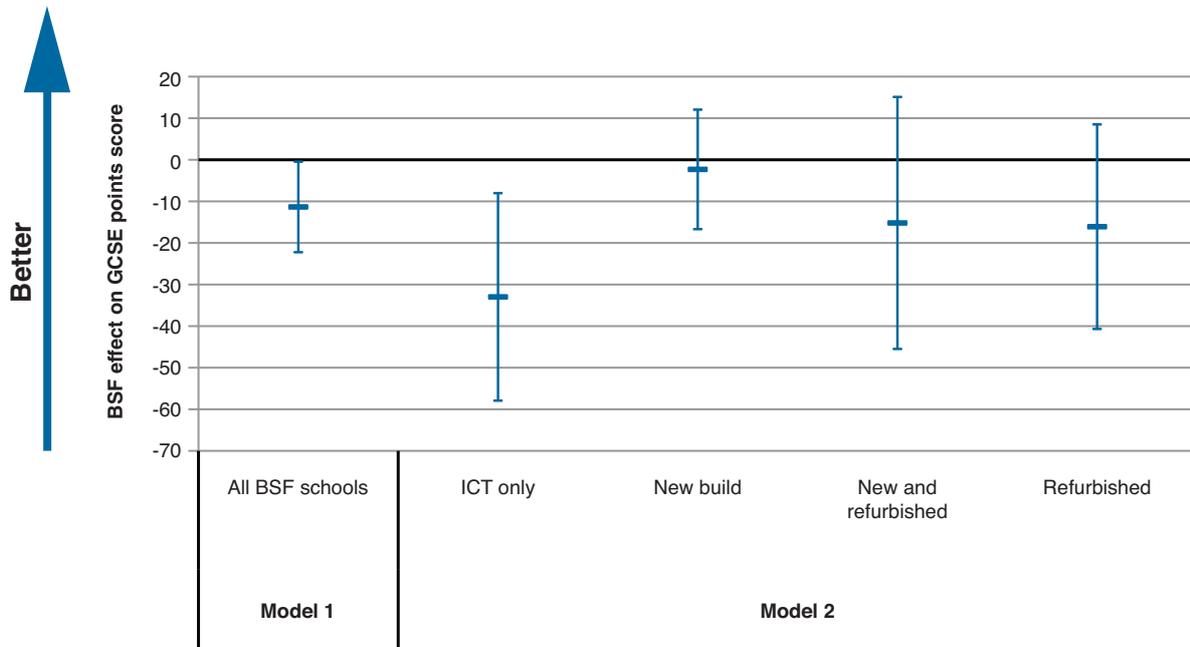
The year 11 model showed that after taking into account all significant pupil characteristics, and all significant school level characteristics, there was no significant difference in the level

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BSF effect on GCSE points score



of absence between BSF schools and non BSF schools. This finding was the same for models using authorised and unauthorised absence as the outcome. Within the year 11 model there were approximately 10,000 pupils in 50 BSF schools.

The year 9 model showed very similar findings with no overall difference in levels of absence between BSF schools and non BSF schools, once the models had taken into account all pupil and school level characteristics. However, when we considered the different types of BSF project, we found that after taking into account all significant background characteristics, pupils in those schools that had a mixture of rebuild and refurbishment had, on average, significantly less unauthorised absence, when compared to other similar pupils in similar schools. Although a significant finding, this is only for six schools and approximately 1,000 pupils and so should be treated with a degree of caution.

Conclusions and next steps

This research has found that pupils at BSF schools made less progress than other pupils, even when pupil- and school-level prior attainment is taken into account. No such difference was found in overall attendance rates at BSF schools, and where combined new building and refurbishment projects had been completed rates even seemed to be better – although with the available data only school-level prior performance could be controlled for.

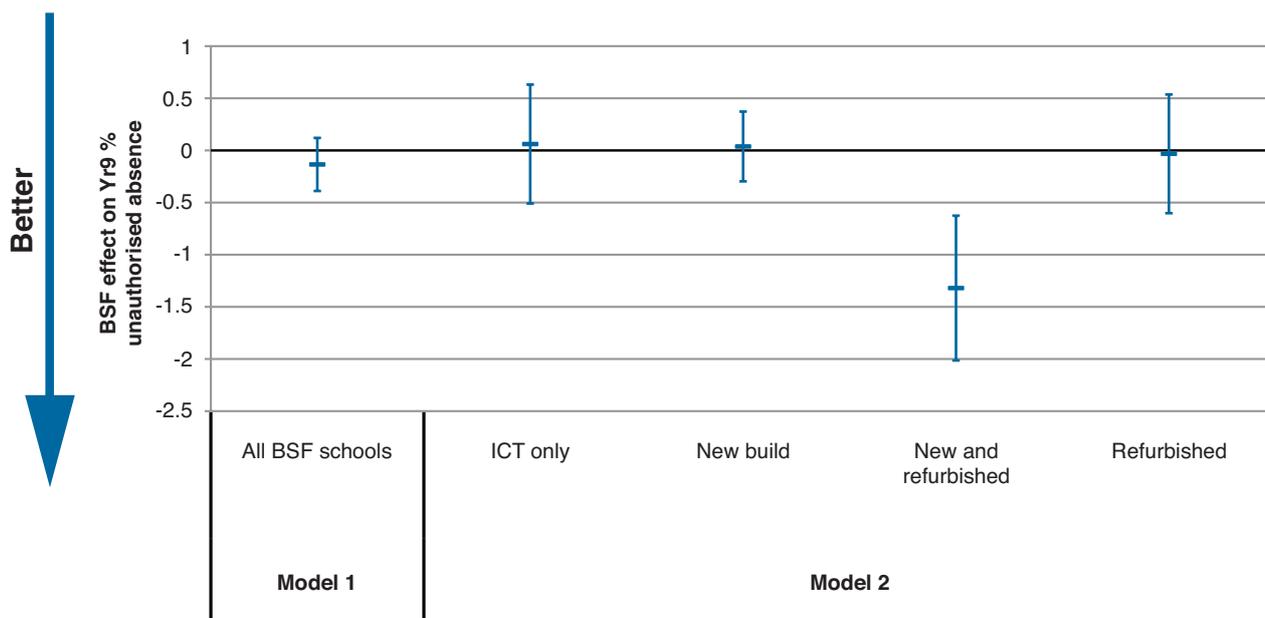
The relationship between attainment and levels of absence has been identified in a number of other reports¹. It could be hypothesised that we would have also expected a negative relationship in the year 11 absence model as the cohort of pupils in BSF schools have made significantly less progress than other similar pupils. Could this be the first signs that pupils in BSF schools are turning the curve and



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BSF effect on year 9 unauthorised absence



are improving their attendance, or is it just the continuation of an already existing trend? Our findings for year 9 in particular add some weight to the belief that although BSF schools have not had an impact on attainment they may be starting to impact on behaviour.

This study is based on a relatively limited set of data, and its findings should be considered in this context. It is hoped to carry out further work looking at an increased number of datasets, including 2010 data soon to be published and historic data in order to place findings into a wider context. This would almost double the number of BSF schools available for analysis, and opens up the possibility of further longitudinal and cross-sectional analysis.

¹ For example, Morris, M. and Rutt, S. (2005). *An Analysis of Pupil Attendance Data in Excellence in Cities (EIC) Areas and Non-EIC EAZs: Final Report*. Research Report RR 657.

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