



Are free schools good for my child?

What are free schools?

Free schools are variously [damned](#) as expensive and wasteful, creating surplus places where they are not needed and taking funds away from areas of need. But [supporters claim](#) they are located in areas of need and provide a better quality of education than local authority schools.

These pioneering schools are providing increased numbers of school places where they are needed, offering greater choice for parents and raising standards across the board.

([Department for Education \(DFE\) 2016](#)).

It's still too soon to tell how good free schools are for pupils' performance. The evidence we have suggests a mixed picture. Free schools are more likely to be judged outstanding by Ofsted, but also more likely to be judged as requiring improvement or inadequate. Free school intakes are significantly more diverse than the national average in terms of ethnicity, but have average numbers of free school meal (FSM) and special educational needs (SEN) pupils. Many free schools are in areas of need, though some aren't. There is evidence that expanding local authority schools is cheaper

than opening up new free schools, because of the cost of the land.

Free schools are new, state-funded schools. Once open, they have the same status as all [academies](#). They are independent of the local authority and run by a ['trust'](#) through a contract with the Secretary of State. All [new schools](#) must be established through the free schools policy. The [first 24](#) free schools opened in September 2011. The total number of open free schools was [425](#) by the start of the academic year 2016/17.

Free schools, which were based on the [US charter school model](#), were first [introduced in 2010](#), by the then Secretary of State Michael Gove. He [explained in 2011](#) that free schools were "about meeting parents' desire for a good local school", and "[to innovate](#)".

An original intention of the policy was to allow parents themselves (and with other [groups](#)) to establish free schools.

So, have they achieved what they were intended to?

Where are free schools and who goes to them?

There are free schools in all English regions. The highest number is in London, where [158](#) are open. According to [available data](#), 132 free schools have been set up in the 10% most deprived local authorities and 13 have been set up in the 10% most affluent local authorities.

The number of free schools is still relatively small, so national comparisons should be treated with caution. When [compared with the population of the local authority](#) in which they are situated (January 2016), primary free schools had a slightly lower proportion of children eligible for FSM than the LA average (13.6 per cent vs. 15.2 per cent) and secondary free schools had slightly higher proportions of pupils eligible for FSM (15 per cent vs. 14.1 per cent).

Free schools students are much more likely to be non-white than the average. The non-white population at primary free schools is 55 per cent (compared to a national rate of 25 per cent), and the equivalent figure for secondary free schools is 46 per cent (compared to a national average of 24 per cent).

The [proportion of pupils](#) at free schools with SEN (statemented and non-statemented) is slightly higher than the national average (13 per cent vs. 12.7 per cent) but the proportion with statements of SEN is lower (0.9 per cent versus 1.3 per cent).

Free schools are more likely to be outstanding but also more likely to have a poor inspection judgement

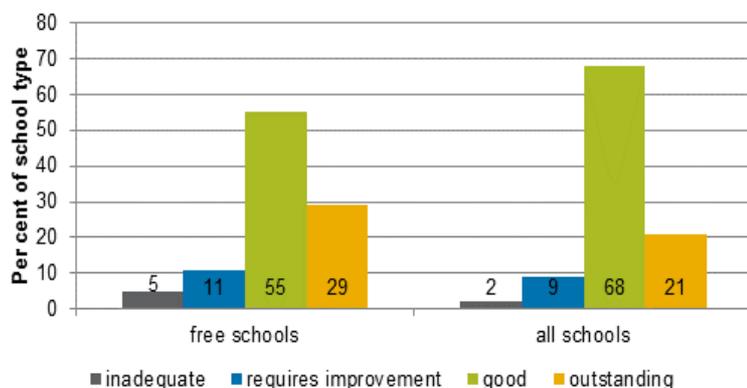
The majority of free schools have [not been opened long enough](#) to have a [track record of attainment](#), but many, however, have an Ofsted judgement.

Care still needs to be taken with these comparisons [because](#) we don't know if the half of free schools that have been inspected are representative of all free schools and the number of open free schools is relatively small compared to other types of school.

[Independent analysis](#), based on the 168 Ofsted inspections of free schools (to May 2017), found that 29 per cent were judged to be outstanding, 55 per cent were good, 11 per cent required improvement and 5 per cent were inadequate.

Compared to [all schools](#), 21 per cent of which were judged to be outstanding at their most recent inspection, 68 per cent were judged to be good, 9 per cent required improvement and 2 per cent were inadequate.

Ofsted judgement



Sources: [Philip Nye](#) and [Ofsted](#)

Given the small number of secondary free schools (32 schools) where students sat GCSEs in 2016, data must be interpreted with caution. The average [attainment 8](#) score per pupil in free schools was slightly lower (-2 per cent) than in converter academies (1322 schools) and slightly higher (+1 per cent) than in local authority schools (1120 schools).

Most free schools are now set up in areas that need new school places, but not always the areas of greatest need

Estimates suggest [420,000 new school places](#) are needed in England by 2021.

There are two ways to create new school places: by establishing a new free school or by expanding the number of places in an existing school.

Free schools were not [originally required](#) to be located in areas where there was a shortage of school places, but applications submitted since [2013](#) have been required to [include](#) “evidence of need”.

[76 per cent](#) of free schools have opened in areas where there is a need for additional school places, according to the DfE.

But a report by the [Public Accounts Committee](#) has commented that, ‘there is no automatic link between a new school being granted permission to open and the need for a new school in an area.’

It went on to [say](#):

The Department could not explain to us how it would judge whether an area has too many places or its plan to make sure that places are being created in the right areas. It said that it would expect local authorities to take action if there was too much spare capacity, even though local

authorities have no control over the opening of free schools or the number of places in academies or free schools in their area.

[21 per cent](#) of secondary free schools are in local authorities where, overall, no new capacity is needed between 2010 and 2020, the [National Audit Office \(NAO\)](#) has said.

120 local authorities responded to an [NAO survey](#) (conducted April 2016-Jan 2017) asking whether free schools are in areas where they are most needed. They said that 50 per cent of primary free schools and 67 per cent of secondary free schools were not located in the areas of greatest need within their area.

It is cheaper to create a new place through the expansion of an existing local authority school than to set up a new free school

Free schools have been [criticised](#) as an expensive way of creating new school places.

The [government claim](#) that “overall the capital costs of free schools are well below the costs of previous programmes... [Free schools have] much lower construction costs than previous programmes.” (DfE 2016)

The NAO has looked extensively at this question.

It found that it is [more expensive](#) to create extra school places in new free schools than in existing local authority schools. Primary places cost on average 33 per cent more in free schools than in local authority led schools. Secondary places cost 51 per cent more in free schools than existing local authority led schools.

The [Department for Education has also spent](#) much more on free schools than it anticipated: in 2010, it estimated that it would cost £900 million by March 2015 to open 315 free schools. It allocated a further £980 million to meet the costs of the programme in 2015-16 and £7 billion to deliver another 500 new free schools by September 2020.

By 2021 it expects to spend £9.7 billion on the free schools programme, out of a total capital investment in schools of £23 billion.

The [cost](#) of each free schools place announced in 2014 and 2015 has risen compared to free schools announced in 2010 and 2011, by 27 per cent for primary places and 37 per cent for secondary places.

A lot of the higher costs have come from the need to buy new land for free schools, the NAO said.

New sites for the schools are expected to cost £2.5 billion in 2016-2021. There is some [evidence](#) that this might be more than the land is worth, and the department has acknowledged that a shortage of skilled negotiators experienced in site acquisition has limited its ability to secure sites quickly and at the best market price. It has set up a company to try and address this.

The NAO also raised concerns that some free schools may be unnecessarily drawing money away from nearby schools, as some of them are receiving funding for places that haven't been filled. Free schools receive funding for the anticipated number of pupils, but some have been [undersubscribed](#). The Department for Education has tried to recoup the extra funding but some free schools have had their [debts](#) written off.

Further reading:

- Public Accounts Committee [Report](#) 'Capital; Funding for Schools', 2017
- House of Commons library [note](#) on Free Schools
- National Audit Office [report](#) on allocation of school funding, 2017

This briefing was written by Dr Claudia Sumner of the National Foundation for Educational Research, June 2017