



Ofsted in the spotlight - How much of a rating is decided before an inspector sets foot inside a school?

Are some schools more likely to get better Ofsted scores, based solely on their student intake and school characteristics?

Ofsted ratings are very prevalent in the media and are often under scrutiny. As recently as 29th January 2024, a cross party group of MPs [recommended](#) a complete overhaul of the grading system, in light of the tragic death of headteacher Ruth Perry in 2023. Nonetheless, parents continue to use them as a method for selecting schools for their children and they are held up as a way of holding senior leaders within schools to account.

A lot is known about the [characteristics most associated with better achievement in education](#), such as certain ethnic groups, parents with more education and a wealthier upbringing. [Additionally, there has been research into whether attending a school with a higher Ofsted rating is significant in predicting higher educational achievement](#). However, less is known about what school characteristics are most typically associated with better Ofsted ratings. Is it simply reflective of the respective affluence of a local area and hence student intake, or is there more to it than that? Simply, how much of a rating is down to factors that the school cannot control?

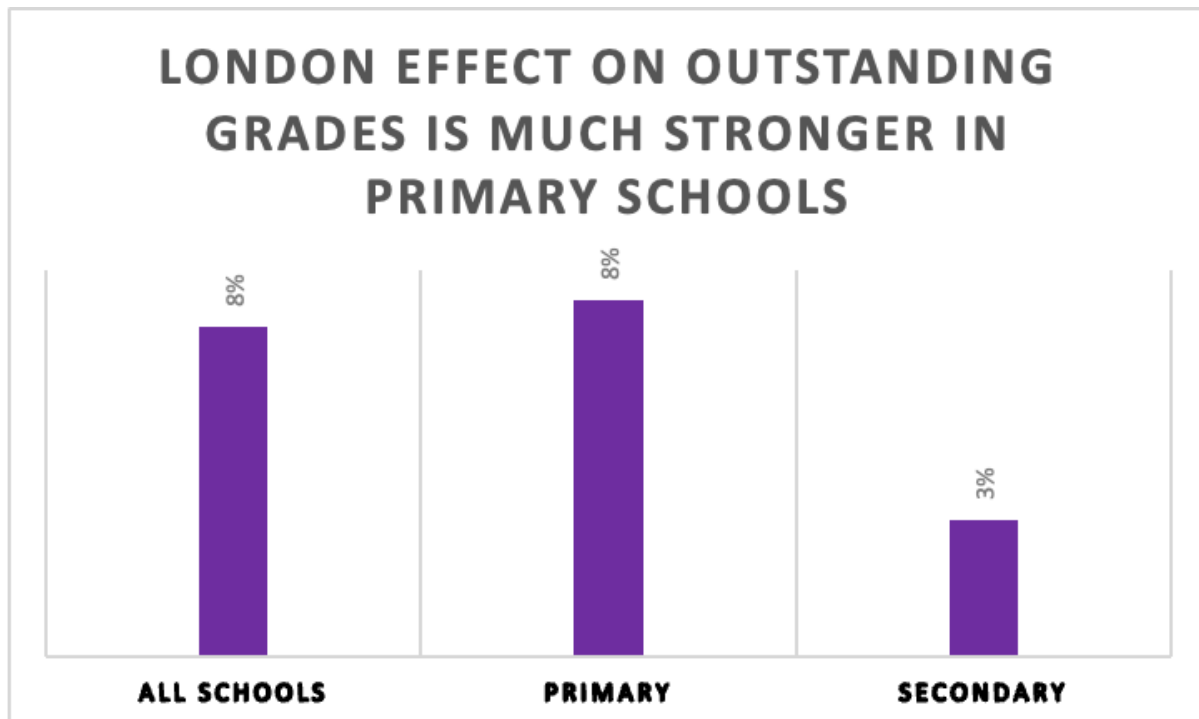
New analysis

New analysis from Inspire Economics covers data from Ofsted inspections of over twenty thousand state funded English schools suggests that London schools are 8 percentage points more likely to be graded as “Outstanding” than schools in the rest of the country. This is even when controlling for factors known to be associated with differing educational achievement, like ethnic make-up, the proportion of students on free school meals (FSM) and speak English as a first language. Schools that are selective (13 percentage points) and that are single sex (8 pts) are also more likely to be outstanding, but it should be noted this represents only a very small proportion of the English state school system. Religious schools are less likely to be outstanding, as schools that are bigger than average and academies. Whilst the academy finding is interesting, this is likely to reflect the fact that schools are encouraged to become academies after a poor Ofsted result. Schools with a greater proportion of white British or FSM students are less likely to be outstanding, but only by a very negligible amount when controlling for other factors.



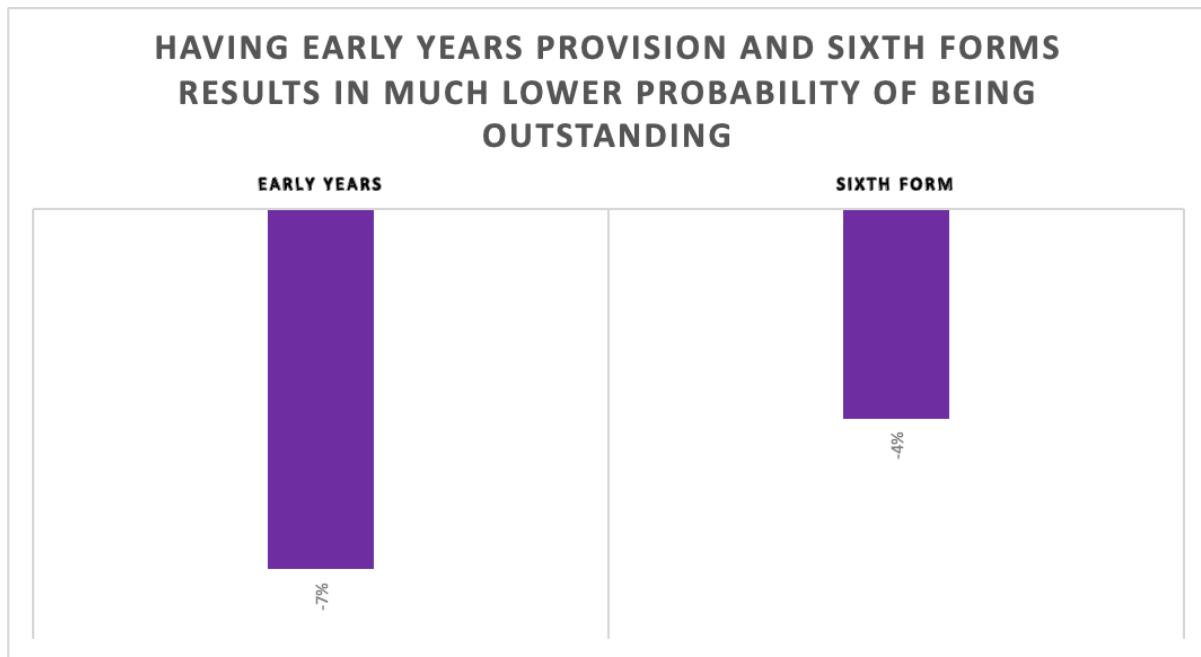
Graph shows the change in probability of being outstanding, based on different school characteristics, than schools without that characteristic

Focusing only on primary and secondary schools brings similar results that are more profound in places. The London impact is slightly higher at primary level as is that of being a single sex school. Interestingly, having early years provision attached to a primary school makes that school 7 pts less likely of being outstanding. It is not clear from the data why this might be and seemingly isn't due to having a greater number of pupils - being above average size has a slight positive relationship with being outstanding.



Graph shows the change in probability of being outstanding, based on being situated in London, by school type

At secondary level, no relationship was found with Ofsted ratings and being an academy, a religious or above average size school or having more students with English as a first language. The London effect is less pronounced at secondary level but is still present. In a similar result to that with early years provision at primary level, having a sixth form suggests schools are 4 ppts less likely to be outstanding. Given what has already been stated about this not being a product of more students, it is perhaps a suggestion that schools offering additional services are more stretched and as a result are under-resourced.



What does this mean?

The London difference is really stark and opens up a lot of questions about what could be driving this. Given the prevalence of the North/South divide and “Levelling Up” in modern political rhetoric, there is perhaps much to be learned about what this means for students growing up outside of the capital.

[Barnaby Lenon](#) of the University of Buckingham outlines several reasons that could be driving this disparity. The London Challenge programme, where schools where data across schools was compared and used to challenge lower performance and create a culture of accountability, is suggested as being a significant reason behind this. This ran from 2003-2011 and brought significant praise from Ofsted.

Lenon also discusses improvements at primary level bringing improvements at secondary level further on. This makes sense, but the difference is not as pronounced in this dataset and does not explain why primary schools in London are much better than elsewhere. There is a suggestion by Greaves (2014) that this is because of London primary schools being pilots for Numeracy and Literacy challenges but not much additional explanation is offered.

Higher prevalence of academies and free schools, the Teach First programme and the higher levels of ethnic diversity in London are also given as reasons for the disparity. Whilst the white British group do perform worst academically and are least represented in London that the rest of England, this analysis controls for ethnicity, so shows that even when that is accounted for, the disparity remains between London



schools and those elsewhere in the country. The results also suggest only a very minor impact (0.2 ppts) on the probability of being outstanding of having fewer white British students. Similarly, academies and free schools are also controlled for in this analysis and aren't shown to have significant impacts on the Ofsted grade.

Teach First was started in London in 2002 and brought in an influx of graduates who might not have considered teaching previously. Whilst it has had arguably more impact in London (it's most represented area for sending recruits), for over ten years has sent graduates around the country. It therefore feels unlikely that it would be driving the level of disparity that we continue to see in 2024.

Hence, it feels to me that there is more to this issue than has been suggested previously. I could only speculate on what the driving factors are and likely it is a combination of several reasons. Department for Education [stats](#) suggest that the pupil/teacher ratio is the lowest in Inner London and this has been consistently the case since 2010 but they also show the proportion of unqualified teachers being higher in London than most other areas of the country. Retention rates for teachers are not published at regional level but vacancy rates are no lower in London than other areas.

London does however, achieve the best [results](#) in the country, consistent from KS2 up to GCSE (and beyond). It is very difficult to disentangle this from the Ofsted ratings. Are schools given better ratings because their results are higher or are their results higher because the schools are better and subsequently do better with Ofsted? The truth is likely to be a bit of both. This does however cast doubt on how effective Ofsted ratings are if they are simply a reflection of results.

Conclusion

As Ofsted ratings face further scrutiny, this research further brings into question the usefulness of a one or two word rating when judging schools. It would perhaps be more useful to combine current measures of academic performance, with more descriptive assessments of school functions such as safeguarding, teaching and leadership. Given the prominence of league tables of academic performance, this seemingly will enable Ofsted ratings to create additional value and hence be more useful to parents, whilst being fairer on teaching staff at the same time. The original purpose of the analysis was in part to try to discover how much of an Ofsted rating was down to factors outside the control of a school, in particular the socio-economic background of the children. This analysis would suggest that the proportion of pupils on free school meals has a negligible impact on Ofsted ratings, which is somewhat reassuring in that respect.