

# THE DEMAND FOR AUTONOMOUS SCHOOLS

Marco Bertoni (University of Padua), Stephen Gibbons (London School of Economics) and Olmo Silva (London School of Economics)

## Abstract

Advocates of reforms aimed at increasing school autonomy and parental choice argue that market-based incentives in education have the potential to improve standards for *all* pupils. However, one potential concern with such settings is that students with different backgrounds might end up segregated in different schools if parental preferences for autonomous schooling are *heterogeneous* along family traits. In this paper, we study parents' demand for autonomous schooling using English administrative data about school applications for three cohorts of children choosing their secondary school. We focus on parental preference for public schools that convert to academy status – that is, state-funded schools that change their institutional settings in order to gain independence from the control of the local education authority in terms of taught curriculum, length of the school day and staff management practices. In order to partial out the effect of time-invariant student and school unobservables that may confound identification of the effect of school autonomy, our analysis controls for school and pupil fixed effects. We also conduct a number of checks that deal with potential time-varying confounders at the school, neighbourhood and student level. Our findings reveal that on average parents express higher demand for autonomous school – but this average effect is not very sizeable. However, there is substantial heterogeneity in parental preferences for autonomous education. Parents of high-achieving pupils and better-off households show much stronger preferences than families with more disadvantaged backgrounds. This finding has important policy implications, as it highlights a potential equity/efficiency trade-off of education systems centred on parental choice and autonomous schooling.