

# Closing the gap? Trends in educational attainment and disadvantage

## Introduction and background

This report from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) considers the attainment gaps between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers, as well as looking at gaps associated with other pupil characteristics. It highlights both the progress which has been made in narrowing gaps over the last decade, and the significant challenges which remain. The report looks at the performance of pupils who undertook the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, Key Stage 2 assessments or GCSEs (or equivalents) in the summer of 2016. It includes all pupils in all state-funded schools, including academies, free schools, local authority maintained schools and special schools. This report does not compare the performance of different types of schools. Rather than focussing on attainment thresholds, such as GCSE attainment, the report examines the attainment of disadvantaged pupils within the whole attainment distribution. All pupils are ranked from the highest to the lowest. The average (mean) rank of the group being considered is then calculated, as is the average (mean) rank of other pupils. The attainment gap is then the difference between these ranks. To aid interpretation this is then converted into months of progress.

## Key points

### Trends in the disadvantage gap

- EPI's annual report published in 2016 highlighted the persistent gap that exists between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. These gaps are evident from the early years and grow throughout schooling. The report estimated that by the end of secondary school, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were 19 months behind their peers. These inequalities persist into adulthood in the form of lower average earnings, poorer health and a greater propensity to become involved in crime.
- When a certain number of children do not reach their full potential, this leads to a waste of human capital and, in turn, to lower economic growth.
- Over the last 10 years there has been progress in narrowing the disadvantage gap. At secondary school, there has been a reduction of three months, or 14 per cent, in the attainment gap since 2007. However, the pace of change is slow. If things were to continue to change at the current rate, it would take over 50 years to get to a point at which the gap did not grow during a child's time in school.
- The report includes the trends for persistently disadvantaged pupils, i.e. those who have been eligible for free school meals for at least 80 per cent of their time in school. For persistently disadvantaged primary aged pupils, the gap remained at the same level in 2016 as it was in 2015 and was the equivalent of 12.3 months. The gap for secondary aged persistently disadvantaged pupils fell in 2016 from 25.5 months to 23.4 months in state-funded mainstream schools and 24.3 months across all state-funded schools.
- The wide attainment gap by the end of secondary school means that only around 1 in 5 disadvantaged pupils are achieving the expected benchmark. For those that were persistently disadvantaged, just 1 in 6 pupils achieved the attainment benchmark. Of the 327,000 pupils who did not

achieve the benchmark in 2016, one third were disadvantaged, although disadvantaged pupils only account for 1 in 4 pupils nationally.

- The attainment gap widens more quickly at some times than at others. Between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 the disadvantage gap grows by 5 months (1.25 months per year) and between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 it grows by 10 months (2 months per year). For persistently disadvantaged pupils, the gap grows from 6 months at the end of Key Stage 1 to 12 months at the end of Key Stage 2 (1.5 months a year) and then 24 months by the end of Key Stage 4 (2.4 months per year).
- At Key Stage 4, the gap in progress, as measured by the Progress 8 measure between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils is 0.48 points: almost half a grade in each GCSE subject. The gap for persistently disadvantaged pupils is greater still, 0.6 of a grade in each GCSE subject.

### Trends in the disadvantage gap by local authority areas

- The analysis in this report looks at the gaps, in months, between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in each local authority area and the national average for non-disadvantaged pupils. This approach gives a clearer idea of how well each area is serving its disadvantaged pupils and avoids excessively penalising areas with more affluent populations.
- There is significant variation in the size of the gap between local authorities, from no gap to seven months in the early years, five to 13 months at the end of primary school and one month to over two years at the end of secondary school.
- At the end of primary school there are six local authority areas in which disadvantaged pupils are over a year behind non-disadvantaged pupils nationally: Blackpool,



Darlington, Leeds, Oldham, Stoke-on-Trent, and York. At the end of secondary school there are two local authority areas in which disadvantaged pupils are fewer than six months behind non-disadvantaged pupils nationally (Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster). However, there are 16 areas where disadvantaged pupils are over two years behind.

- Some of the largest gaps at the end of secondary school are in rural areas, e.g. Cumbria and Northumberland.
- The largest gap for children in early years was in Halton (7 months). For primary school pupils it was in Leeds (13 months), and for secondary school pupils it was in the Isle of Wight (29 months). The smallest gaps were in: Newham for early years children (no gap), Poole for primary school pupils (5 months), Kensington & Chelsea for secondary school pupils (1 month).
- The gaps for disadvantaged pupils in Tower Hamlets, Redbridge, Westminster and Hammersmith & Fulham were fairly small at all phases of education; less than 3 months in early years, 8 months in primary schools and 10 months in secondary schools.
- The gaps were all relatively large in all phases in Redcar & Cleveland; greater than 6 months in early years, greater than 12 months in primary schools and greater than 24 months in secondary schools.
- Since 2012, the gap nationally has narrowed by 0.6 months in the early years and 0.7 months in each of primary and secondary. Some authorities such as Poole have narrowed the gap significantly more than similar local authorities. However, Darlington has seen significant increases at both phases.

#### The performance of disadvantaged pupils in different areas.

- In 2014 the Department for Education introduced eight Regional School Commissioners (RSCs) primarily as part of the academies and free schools programmes. The RSCs are split across eight regions. This analysis looked at overall progress and attainment across the RSC regions.
- Amongst the RSC regions, South London & South East has the highest levels of attainment in both primary schools (57 per cent achieving the expected standard) and early years settings (74 per cent). The North West London and South Central region had the highest level of secondary attainment, with 44 per cent of pupils achieving 50+ points in Attainment 8.
- Attainment levels were lowest across all phases in Lancashire & West Yorkshire, East Midlands & Humber and the West Midlands. The North has similarly low levels of attainment in both early years settings and secondary schools, but relatively high performance in primary schools, with 55 per cent of pupils achieving the new Key Stage 2 expected level.
- The analysis looked at the gap in months between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in RSC regions with the national averages for non-disadvantaged pupils.
- The North, Lancashire & West Yorkshire and East Midlands & Humber all had relatively large gaps for all phases; over 4.5 months by the end of the early years, over 9.5 months by the end of primary school and over 21 months by the end of secondary school. The smallest gaps were in North East London & East, where the gaps were just 3 months by the end of the early years, 9 months by the end of primary school and 16 months by the end of secondary school.
- There is far greater disparity between regions in terms of the disadvantage gap at secondary level than at primary. For example, by the end of primary school the gaps range

from 8.8 months in North East London and East to 10.8 months in Lancashire & West Yorkshire. The gap during secondary ranges from 6.9 months in North East London & East to 12.6 months in South West and East Midlands & Humber.

- The DfE has identified 12 Opportunity Areas to which it has promised additional funding and resources. The analysis showed that progress for the average pupil in Opportunity Areas is below that of pupils in the rest of England, in both primary and secondary schools. Disadvantaged pupils in Opportunity Areas are further behind non-disadvantaged pupils than disadvantaged pupils in the rest of England. In the early years, they are 0.2 months behind disadvantaged pupils in the rest of England (4.5 minus 4.3) and 4.5 months behind the average non-disadvantaged pupil in England. By the end of secondary school both gaps have increased further; disadvantaged pupils in Opportunity Areas are over 4.4 months behind disadvantaged pupils in the rest of England and 23.5 months behind the average non-disadvantaged pupil in England.

#### Further vulnerable groups

- The analysis looked briefly at the progress and attainment gaps of a range of other groups. The first group to be considered were pupils whose first language is other than English (referred to here as EAL pupils). The performance of EAL pupils compared to their peers varies according to a range of other factors that are not fully captured in the data (e.g. their first language, English proficiency, whether they are new to the English education system, and their prior experience of education elsewhere).
- Overall, EAL pupils have lower attainment than their non-EAL peers during primary school but, by the end of secondary school, this gap has disappeared. In fact, by this point EAL pupils are marginally ahead of their non-EAL peers.
- The analysis considers the attainment of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). It considers results for pupils with SEND who have a statement or Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan following a formal assessment, pupils with SEND without a statement/EHCP (often identified within the school), in comparison to pupils with no identified SEND.
- As expected, pupils with special educational needs and disabilities are disproportionately found at the lower end of the attainment distribution. The gap between these pupils and their non-SEND peers is wider at Key Stage 4.
- Pupils with SEND are, however, found across the attainment distribution; around 15 per cent are in the top half.
- There are some significant differences in the performance of various ethnic groups. Chinese pupils overall are the highest performing group and are disproportionately in the top quarter of attainment. This pattern is far more pronounced at Key Stage 4 than at Key Stage 1.
- Pupils of Black African backgrounds tend to move up the attainment distribution between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 4, in other words they make more progress than their peers. However, pupils from Black Caribbean backgrounds tend to fall back over the course of schooling.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/closing-the-gap-web.pdf>

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