

General election policy briefing: Closing the attainment gap

Introduction and background

As the next General Election approaches, the Sutton Trust is publishing a series of briefings in key policy areas to influence policymakers and inform the media and the public in the run up to the election. This latest briefing looks at the attainment gap, i.e., the difference in educational outcomes between students from more and less affluent backgrounds.

The Sutton Trust points out that attainment at school has a lifelong impact. At every level, achieving lower grades closes off options and limits access to prospective educational establishments and employers in a competitive environment. Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that in 2019-20, more than 70 per cent of those earning over £50,000 per year and 80 per cent of those earning over £100,000 were graduates, while nearly half of those earning £20,000 or less were educated to GCSE level or lower. Furthermore, the failure of lower income young people to reach their potential means that employers are missing out on talent.

This briefing puts forward a series of recommendations on how the next government can work towards closing the gap for good.

Key points

Measuring the attainment gap

- When the government publishes data on the attainment gap, it usually focuses on free school meals (FSM) eligibility.
- Although FSM is a good measure, it is not a perfect way to look at socio-economic status. It is binary and defined by a rigid income threshold. It also only identifies those at the very bottom of the income spectrum. This means it misses many families who will be struggling financially.
- The FSM measure depends on families registering for FSM, which many eligible families may not. There have also been changes in eligibility rules over time which affect comparability between years.
- In addition to the FSM measure, the DfE publishes a disadvantage gap index which ranges from +10 (disadvantaged achieving less than other pupils) to -10 (disadvantaged achieving more) with an index of zero meaning no difference between the groups.
- Disadvantage takes different forms - there are gaps in attainment between pupils in terms of other characteristics, including ethnicity, gender, and geographical area.
- standards in reading, writing, maths, grammar, punctuation and spelling.
- The disadvantage gap index at KS2 closed steadily between 2010 and 2019, dropping from 3.34 in 2010-11 to 2.91 in 2018-19.
- However, after the pandemic the index jumped back up to 3.23, a level not seen since 2011-12. In 2023, 22 percentage points fewer disadvantaged pupils achieved the expected standards in reading, writing and maths at the end of KS2 when compared to other pupils (44% compared to 66%).
- When exams returned in 2022 after the disruption of the pandemic, the disadvantage attainment gap index had gone up to 3.84, from 3.7 pre-pandemic. As of 2023, it now stands at 3.94, having risen to its highest level since 2011 (4.07), reversing a decade of progress in closing the gap.
- In 2023, 25.2 per cent of disadvantaged pupils achieved grades of 5 or above in English and maths GCSEs (a strong pass). This is less than half of the proportion of non-disadvantaged pupils (52.4%).
- The attainment gap at KS5 is measured as the difference in the average points score between disadvantaged (FSM) and non-disadvantaged pupils. (measured by FSM eligibility). However, the KS5 disadvantage gap underestimates of the difference in educational outcomes for 16–19-year-olds from different backgrounds, as many disadvantaged young people have already gone on to different pathways in either education or the workplace. In 2022-23, of the 255,992 pupils who took A levels, only 14.2 per cent were from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- In 2023, for A levels, the average points score gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students stood at 4.9, almost the same as in 2017.
- For Tech levels (e.g. BTECs) and applied general qualifications the gap, although smaller, grew over the period from 2017 to 2023 (2.4 to 2.7 for Tech levels and 1.7 to 2.4 for applied general qualifications). This may be because applied general qualifications increased in popularity between 2018 and 2022,

The attainment gap across different phases of education

- The attainment gap is first officially measured at the end of the early years foundation stage (EYFS), at the end of the academic year in which a child turns 5. It is measured by comparing the percentage of children reaching a so-called 'good level of development' (GLD) in the EYFS profile assessment, with comparisons between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children.
- The early years attainment gap had been narrowing in the 2010s, but pre-pandemic the gap had again started to widen, with this trend continuing since. In 2022-23, 71.5 per cent of non-FSM eligible children achieved a good level of development, compared to 51.6 per cent of FSM eligible children.
- Attainment at KS2 is measured by looking at the proportion of children who reach the expected

particularly among disadvantaged pupils, and those with lower prior attainment.

- The Education Policy Institute (EPI) convert attainment gap data into a 'months of learning gap', to give a more understandable measure of the attainment gap. Their work found that in 2022, disadvantaged primary school pupils were 4.8 months behind their more advantaged peers in their reception year, rising to 10.3 months behind at the end of KS2 and up to more than 18 months at KS4.

Reasons for the attainment gap

- The attainment gap is the result of an often complex combination of interrelated factors, but income deprivation and inequality are the most important factors and contributors.
- The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the vital role of schools, as pupils were out of their classrooms for long periods, and gaps widened as a result.
- Income levels impact educational outcomes at both the top and bottom ends of the spectrum. At the very top end of the income spectrum, parents are able to directly buy advantages, such as private education for their children. At the lower end, experiences of poverty, including family stress, instability, and hunger, can also impact directly on children's ability to learn.
- Overall, no progress has been made in reducing child poverty over the last decade. This limits the impact the education system can have on the attainment gap. Research in the US has shown that food insecurity in low-income households is linked with reductions in both cognitive and socio-emotional skills.
- A further impact of poverty on learning comes through cramped or poor housing conditions. Children living in poor housing are more likely to suffer from bad health and miss more school. Due to a lack of space, poorer children find it more difficult to complete homework and study at home.
- The cost-of-living crisis has had a significant impact. In 2022, in state schools, 38 per cent of teachers reported an increase in children coming into school hungry, 74 per cent saw an increase in pupils unable to concentrate or tired in class, 67 per cent had more students with behaviour issues, and 54 per cent saw an increase in those without adequate winter clothing like a coat.
- In recent years, teacher recruitment has become a serious problem which disproportionately affects schools in more deprived areas. Sutton Trust research has found that schools serving disadvantaged communities experience more recruitment problems, particularly in the secondary sector. In their study, 85 per cent of teachers in disadvantaged schools said that recruitment was affecting the quality of education in their school. The study also found that teachers generally considered schools in disadvantaged areas to be harder to teach in, and teachers in such schools were more likely to leave the profession.
- Disadvantaged schools also have fewer teachers with relevant teaching qualifications. This situation is particularly acute in the core subjects of maths and science.
- The school system in England is highly socially segregated. The most obvious part of this divide is between the state and independent sectors, but there are also divides in who can access grammar schools, and the highest performing state comprehensive schools. The top comprehensives in England have fewer FSM eligible pupils in their intakes than in the catchment areas they draw from. This means that

pupils from poorer families are less likely than their wealthier contemporaries to attend a top 500 school in terms of attainment even if there is one in their immediate area.

- School absences have been found to link to low educational attainment, and disadvantaged pupils have been found to have higher rates of absence.
- There are large gaps in access to private tutoring by socio-economic background. Sutton Trust polling revealed that 39 per cent of pupils in the best-off homes had ever received private tutoring compared to just 22 per cent in the worst-off homes.
- In addition to material factors, parental values and attitudes are important factors which provide middle class children with more cultural and social capital. Cultural capital refers to cultural resources such as books in the home, more visits to museums, art galleries and other cultural contexts. Social capital is closely related but refers to family social resources – networks of friends, relatives and acquaintances – that may help middle class students get ahead.

Recommendations for closing the attainment gap

- Below are several steps which the Sutton Trust recommends that the next government should undertake.
- Reform the National Funding Formula to rebalance funding back towards schools serving the most disadvantaged communities.
- Extend the Pupil Premium to post-16 institutions, in view of the fact that the attainment gap doesn't end at 16, and neither should dedicated funding.
- Renew the National Tutoring Programme with ringfenced funding for the long-term and target it at disadvantaged pupils.
- Ensure no child is hungry in school by expanding free school meal eligibility to all children on Universal Credit and increasing breakfast club provision.
- Tackle the teacher recruitment and retention crisis and incentivise the best teachers to work in the most disadvantaged schools by making changes across the system, including enhancing financial incentives and increasing flexibility.
- Tackle pupil absence through evidence-based interventions with a particular focus on getting the most disadvantaged students back into the classroom.
- Reduce social segregation in schools by making admissions policies fairer including requiring schools to prioritise Pupil Premium applicants in their oversubscription criteria.
- Build evidence on and scale up the interventions that work, for example through models like the Education Endowment Foundation accelerator fund.
- Since the education system alone cannot eradicate the attainment gap, any meaningful strategy needs to include a plan to reduce and ultimately end child poverty in the UK.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/closing-the-attainment-gap/>