

# General Election Policy Briefing

## Closing the Attainment Gap



**FEBRUARY 2024**

### OVERVIEW

- The attainment gap had been gradually decreasing throughout the early 2010s, before progress stalled in the years before the pandemic. Since the crisis, the gap has widened considerably, with 10 years of progress now wiped out.
- Children from less well-off homes start school already behind their classmates, and gaps only widen further through primary and secondary school.
- The attainment gap is caused by a wide variety of factors in the home and in schools, with many exacerbated by the recent pandemic and cost of living crises. In 2022, 56% of head teachers reported an increase in children coming to school hungry in the autumn term, with greater increases in more deprived areas.
- Educational factors including inadequate school funding, uneven access to quality teaching, unfair admissions, school absence, and inequalities in access to private tuition are all likely to be contributing to the gap.
- Recent years have seen a disproportionate negative impact on funding for schools serving deprived communities. In 2013, spending per pupil in both state primary and secondary schools in the most deprived areas was more than 30% greater than in the least deprived areas. By 2021 this had dropped to around 20%, due largely to reforms to the National Funding Formula.
- Tutoring is a key method of boosting learning. There are significant socio-economic gaps in access to private tutoring. While these gaps have been levelled out by the National Tutoring Programme, with 27% of FSM pupils reporting they received tutoring from school in 2023, the NTP is set to be ended in 2024, removing a vital tool to address the attainment gap.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEXT GOVERNMENT

#### A national mission to close the attainment gap: A ten point plan

A long-term, national strategy from government is needed to bring a renewed and explicit focus to closing the attainment gap.

The next government should:

1. **Reform the National Funding Formula** to rebalance funding back towards schools serving the most disadvantaged communities.
2. **Reverse the real terms erosion of Pupil Premium funding**, restoring funding to previous levels.
3. **Extend the Pupil Premium to post-16 institutions.** The attainment gap doesn't end at 16, and neither should dedicated funding.
4. **Renew the National Tutoring Programme with ringfenced funding for the long-term** and target it at disadvantaged pupils.
5. **Ensure no child is hungry in school** by expanding free school meal eligibility to all children on Universal Credit, and increasing breakfast club provision.
6. **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.
7. **Tackle pupil absence through evidence-based interventions** with a particular focus on getting the most disadvantaged students back into the classroom.
8. **Reduce social segregation in schools by making admissions policies fairer** including requiring schools to prioritise Pupil Premium applicants in their oversubscription criteria.
9. **Build evidence on and scale up the interventions that work** for example through models like the Education Endowment Foundation accelerator fund.
10. However, the education system alone cannot eradicate the attainment gap, so a true strategy would include **a plan to reduce and ultimately to end child poverty in the UK.**

## CONTEXT

The attainment gap is the difference in educational outcomes between students from more and less affluent backgrounds. Research has consistently shown that more disadvantaged children have lower educational outcomes compared to their peers from wealthier backgrounds. Attainment is also the biggest driver of gaps in university progression and has knock-on implications for young people's careers, and ultimately the chances of social mobility.

During the early 2010s, the attainment gap across all school stages had been narrowing gradually over time. However, this progress stalled in 2017, before the pandemic altered the landscape considerably. Since 2020, the attainment gap has widened notably, with 10 years of progress in closing the gap wiped out in just a few years. While there has been broad support across the political spectrum for efforts to reduce the gap, it has not been a major issue in political debate. Yet this is a ticking time bomb for future social mobility and social cohesion.

Ahead of the next general election, there is a need for a renewed political focus on the issue, and a new national mission to close the gap. This briefing outlines existing evidence on the attainment gap, including how it is measured, how it has changed over time, as well as the long-term impacts for both individuals and the wider economy.

It also examines the underlying factors preventing lower income young people from meeting their potential, with recommendations on what the next government can do to work towards closing the gap for good.

## HOW IS THE ATTAINMENT GAP MEASURED?

The attainment gap is measured by looking at the gap in achievement between students from different socio-economic backgrounds, with a focus on family income and socio-economic status.

## "This is a ticking time bomb for future social mobility and social cohesion."

When the government publishes data on the attainment gap, it usually focuses on free school meals (FSM) eligibility (see Appendix for eligibility criteria).<sup>1</sup> Data is published by the Department for Education (DfE) on overall attainment levels using different measures for different stages of education, from the early years through to A levels (see below).

The DfE also publishes a disadvantage gap index. The index was introduced in 2015 to provide a measure that would be more resilient to changes in assessment over time and ranks students relative to one another to enable comparisons between groups. The index 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.

All of these official measures rely on the use of FSM eligibility as a marker of disadvantage. While FSM is a good measure, it is not a perfect way to look at socio-economic status. The measure 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. It also relies 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.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers looking at the attainment gap in greater detail have also used parental income, which allows the full income spectrum to be examined. However, parental income is currently only available to researchers in certain contexts, and despite calls for this data to be made available more widely (which would require government tax data being linked to the national pupil database),<sup>3</sup> the government has yet to do so.<sup>4</sup>

## HOW LARGE IS THE ATTAINMENT GAP?

The attainment gap is measured at various points throughout a pupil's journey through the education system, including at the start of primary school (early years foundation stage - EYFS), the end of key stage 2 (Year 6, at the end of primary school), key stage 4 (GCSEs) and key stage 5 (A levels, T levels and equivalents).

### Early Years Foundation Stage

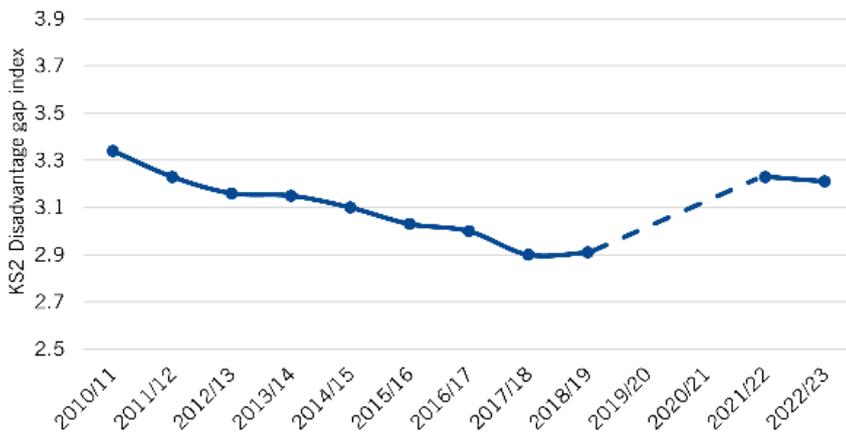
The attainment gap first opens up before children even start at school, leaving lower income pupils behind their peers at the very beginning of their time in the education system. The gap is first officially measured at the end of the early years foundation stage (EYFS), the end of the academic year in which a child turns five. 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 (measured by FSM eligibility).

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% of non-FSM eligible children achieved a good level of development, compared to 51.6% of FSM eligible children.

For more information, see the recent Sutton Trust policy briefing, [Inequality in Early Years Education](#).

**"The attainment gap first opens up before children even start at school, leaving lower income pupils behind their peers at the very beginning of their time in the education system."**

Figure 1: Disadvantage gap index at Key Stage 2 2020/11 to 2022/23.



Source: Department for Education.<sup>6</sup> No data available for 2019/20 and 2022/21 due to the pandemic.

### Key Stage 2 (Primary School)

Attainment at KS2 is measured by looking at the proportion of children who reach the expected standards in reading, writing, maths, grammar, punctuation and spelling.

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%).<sup>5</sup>

The disadvantage gap index at KS2 closed steadily, though only slightly, between 2010 and 2019, dropping from 3.34 in 2010/11 to 2.91 in 2018/19.

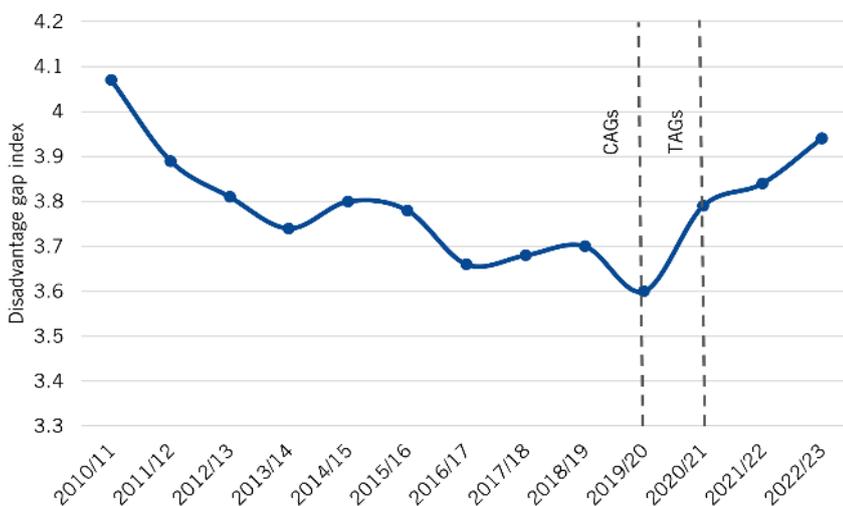
However, after the pandemic the index jumped back up to 3.23, a level not seen since 2011/12 (See Figure 1).

### Key Stage 4 (GCSE)

In 2023, 25.2% 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%).

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

Figure 2: Disadvantage gap index at Key Stage 4. CAG = Centre assessment grades, TAG = Teacher assessment grades.



Source: Department for Education.

Note: During the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, exams were replaced with centre assessed (2020) and teacher assessed (2021) grades. Data on the attainment gap in these years should therefore be treated with caution.

at 3.94, having risen to its highest level since 2011 (4.07), reversing a decade of progress in closing the gap (Figure 2).<sup>7</sup>

### Key Stage 5 (A level and vocational qualifications)

The attainment gap at KS5 is measured as the difference in the average points score between disadvantaged (FSM) and non-disadvantaged pupils. All level 3 qualification grades, including A levels and other level 3 qualifications, are given a harmonised points score.<sup>8</sup>

However, KS5 is the first point in the British education system where young people split off onto different pathways. In 2022/23, 255,992 pupils took A levels, of which only 14.2% were from disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to 26.3% of pupils at KS4.<sup>9</sup>

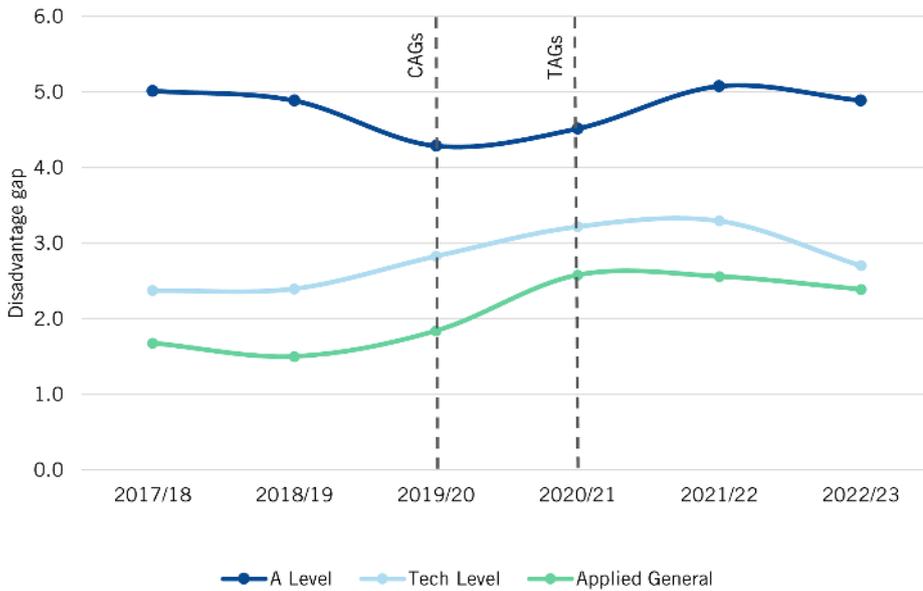
Consequently, the KS5 disadvantage gap is an underestimate of the difference in educational outcomes for 16-19 year olds from different backgrounds, as many disadvantaged young people have already gone on to different pathways in either education or the workplace.

In 2023, for A levels the average points score gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students stood at 4.9, which had barely changed since 2017, when the figure was 5.0.

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 – see Figure 3 below).<sup>10</sup> This may be explained by how applied general qualifications increased in popularity between 2018 and 2022, particularly among disadvantaged pupils, and those with lower levels of prior attainment.<sup>11</sup>

**"Lower income young people not attaining to their potential also means that employers are missing out on talent."**

Figure 3: The disadvantage gap for A level and vocational qualifications 2017/18 to 2022/23.



### Understanding the attainment gap

Percentage point differences, or differences in the attainment gap index, can be difficult to decipher when it comes to real world impacts of the attainment gap on young people. The Education Policy Institute (EPI) in their annual reports on education in England 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 (see

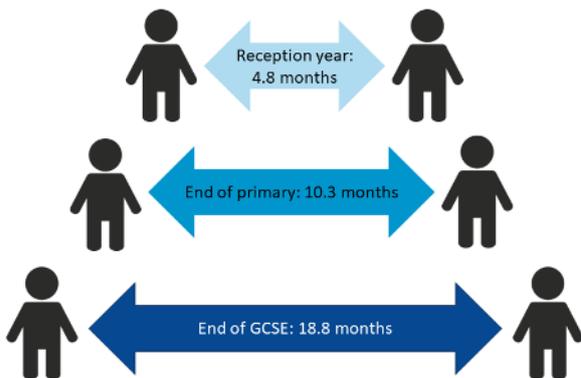
Figure 4).<sup>12</sup> The disadvantage gap also increased by around 0.7 months across all stages of schooling between 2019 and 2022, over the period of the pandemic (Figure 5; see overleaf).

It should also be noted that disadvantage takes many different forms, and there are also gaps in attainment between pupils looking at other characteristics, including between different ethnicities, genders and by geographical area.<sup>13</sup>

### Why the attainment gap matters

How well pupils attain at school has a lifelong impact, both in terms of their next steps in education and their journey into the workplace. Attaining below one's potential at KS4 can

Figure 4: The disadvantage gap at reception and the end of KS2 and KS4 in 2022.



Source: Education Policy Institute.

make the difference between being able to go onto A levels post-16 and this route being blocked off. For others, it could be the difference between gaining a place on a top university course or apprenticeship, and not. At every level, achieving lower grades closes off options, and limits access to prospective educational establishments and employers in a competitive environment. For example, Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) research found that in 2019-20, more than 70% of those earning over £50,000 per year and 80% over £100,000 were graduates, while nearly half of those earning £20,000 or less were educated to GCSE level or lower.<sup>14</sup>

Importantly, lower income young people not attaining to their potential also means that employers are missing out on talent. And this has an impact on the economy, Sutton Trust research has estimated that if social mobility in the UK increased to the average level in Western Europe, GDP could be roughly 2% higher.<sup>15</sup>

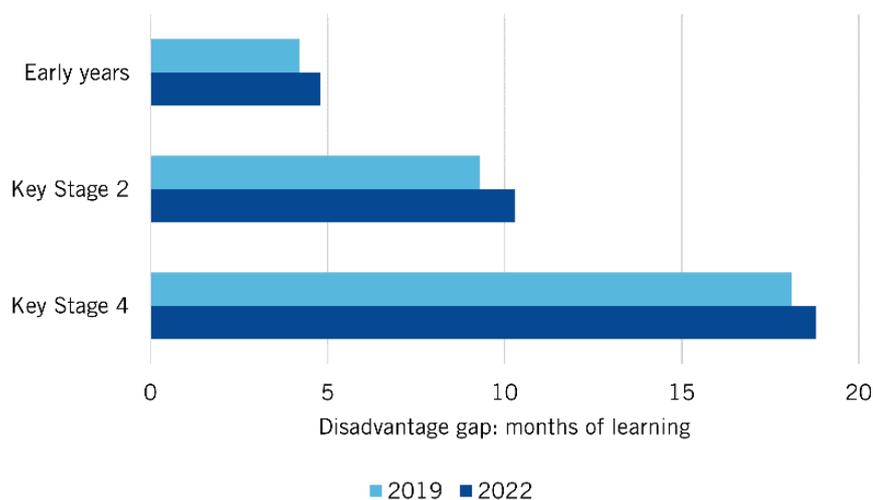
**"But despite these structural economic inequalities, what schools do really matters."**

### WHAT LIES BEHIND THE ATTAINMENT GAP?

The attainment gap is the result of an often complex combination of interrelated factors centred around the economic, social and cultural resources that pupils and their families have at their disposal.

Ultimately, income deprivation and inequality are the most important factors and contributors to the gap, manifesting in a variety of ways in the home and at school. But despite these structural economic inequalities, what schools do really matters.<sup>16</sup> Inequalities within the education system also contribute to the gap, including differences in funding between schools, the higher concentration of teacher recruitment and retention problems in more disadvantaged areas, as well as admissions policies at the highest performing schools that favour middle-class or wealthier families.

Figure 5: Disadvantage gap in months of learning.



Source: Education Policy Institute.

In the last few years, the COVID-19 pandemic showed the vital role of schools as a leveller, as pupils were out of their classrooms for long periods, and gaps widened as a consequence.

**Wider social factors**

*Income inequality and poverty - context*

Income levels impact educational outcomes at both the top and bottom ends of the spectrum. At the very top end, high income parents are able to buy their children direct advantages, for example by paying for private education, additional private tuition, or by buying a home in the catchment area of a top school. High incomes are also protective against many issues that can have a negative impact on educational attainment, for example children in lower income families are more likely to suffer from mental health problems,<sup>17</sup> with lower educational outcomes for children experiencing mental health difficulties.<sup>18</sup> And as outlined in greater detail below, experiences of poverty, including family stress, instability, and hunger, can also impact directly on children's ability to learn, and subsequently on their educational outcomes. The wider income inequality is in a society, the larger these differences will be in children's experiences. And large differences in income levels in society also increase the stakes for parents, creating more pressure on those able to do so to secure advantages for their own children.

Income inequality in the UK is relatively high compared to other OECD countries.<sup>19</sup> And while it is currently at a similar level to that seen in the 1990s, income inequality is higher now than it was in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>20</sup>

According to recent research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation around one in five adults, and 3 out of 10 children, were in relative poverty after housing costs in 2021/22.<sup>21</sup> Relative child poverty was falling in the UK before 2010, before following a broadly upward trend until 2020. During the pandemic, relative child poverty fell sharply (in part due to some falling middle incomes combined with government interventions, such

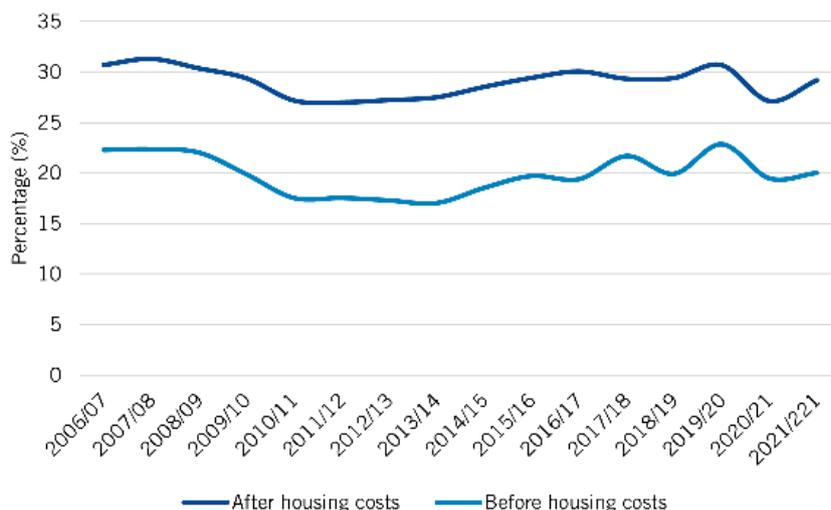
as the furlough scheme, to support those on low incomes) before rising sharply again after the crisis. Overall, no progress has been made in reducing child poverty over the last decade (see Figure 6). This limits the impact the education system can have on the attainment gap. A full outline of poverty trends in the UK over time can be found [here](#).

*Food insecurity and hunger*

Food poverty is a substantial issue in the UK. The UK's largest food bank network, the Trussell Trust, reported distributing nearly 3 million emergency food parcels in the 12 months to March 2023, representing the most ever distributed by the network in a year and a 37% increase from 2021-22. Of these, 1 million were for children.<sup>23</sup> Recent research from the longitudinal COSMO study found that 8% of families with children reported skipping meals or being hungry but not eating due to lack of resources. Overall, one in seven households (14%) reported at least one indicator of food insecurity with 10% of households classed as having low or very low food security.<sup>24</sup>

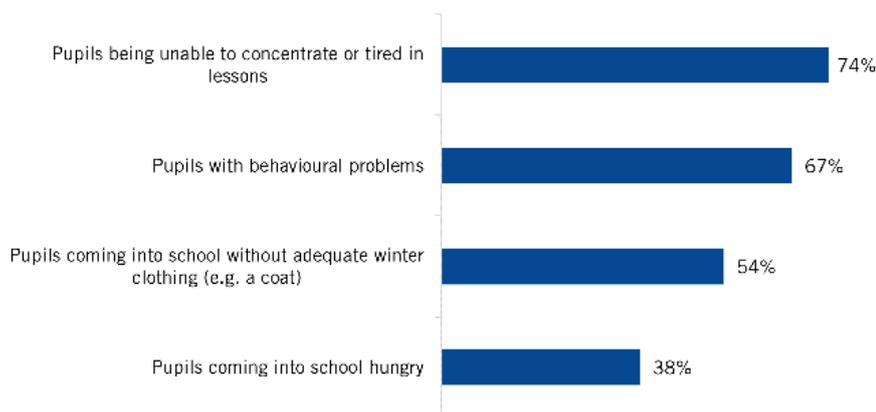
Poverty has a considerable impact on educational attainment.<sup>25</sup> Research in the US has shown that food insecurity in low-income households is linked with reductions in both cognitive and socio-emotional skills.<sup>26</sup> This may be because of a range of factors, including reduced

Figure 6: Children in relative poverty (60% or less of median income) 2006/7 to 2021/22.



Source: Department for Work and Pensions.<sup>22</sup>

Figure 7: Percentage of state-school teachers seeing the following increase for their pupils in 2022.<sup>39</sup>



engagement from parents suffering from hunger. The tiredness children will experience from hunger can also reduce their own exploration of their environment, impacting on skill development.<sup>27</sup> This means that ‘children in households with any signs of food insecurity score lower and learn less during the school year.’<sup>28</sup> Hunger adversely affects children’s concentration, energy levels, behaviour and ability to understand and remember in school, all of which will negatively affect their progress and ability to learn.<sup>29</sup>

### Housing conditions

Another 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.<sup>30</sup> Research in the UK in 2006 found that children living in poor quality housing were almost twice as likely to gain no GCSEs than other children and were twice as likely not to attend school.<sup>31</sup> Cold, damp or poorly ventilated housing causes health problems, while cramped housing conditions often mean children sharing their bedrooms with other siblings or family members and having limited or no private or quiet study space. This means that poorer children will find it more difficult to complete homework and study at home well. Research has shown that overcrowded housing leads to poorer physical and mental health among adults and children which have knock-on effects for learning.<sup>32</sup> In 2023 there were also record numbers of people living in temporary, often

poor quality, accommodation, up 10% on the previous year to 104,510.<sup>33</sup>

### The COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis

Economic crises can magnify the impact of these factors on education. This was particularly clear during lockdowns, as in the pandemic many children from poorer families lacked devices and internet access for online learning, as well as quiet spaces to study.<sup>34</sup> Sutton Trust research found that 35% of households in the lowest income quintile reported not having sufficient devices in their house for online learning during lockdown, compared to just 11% in the highest income quintile.<sup>35</sup>

Sutton Trust research has also examined the impact the cost of living crisis is currently having in

schools. Near the start of the crisis, in 2022, in state schools, 38% of teachers reported an increase in children coming into school hungry, 74% saw an increase in pupils unable to concentrate or tired in class, 67% had more students with behaviour issues and 54% saw an increase in those without adequate winter clothing like a coat (Figure 7).<sup>36</sup>

Polling by YouGov for Barnardo’s also found that 54% of parents had cut back on food spending, with 20% saying they struggled to provide sufficient food and 26% having to sell possessions to cope with the cost of living crisis, echoing similar findings from other research.<sup>37</sup>

A more recent study from NFER found that senior school leaders (over 84% across all settings) reported that cost of living pressures had increased both the numbers of pupils requiring additional support and the level of need, particularly in the most disadvantaged schools, where additional support referred to needs over and above what might usually be provided through Pupil Premium and other statutory funding.<sup>38</sup> These are all, as we have seen, contributory factors to the educational attainment gap.

### Within the education system

#### Teacher recruitment and retention

High quality teaching is the most effective way of improving pupil outcomes.<sup>40</sup> However, teacher recruitment and retention has

Figure 8: Percentage of teachers saying the inability to recruit suitably qualified staff was affecting the quality of education provided in their school.<sup>43</sup>

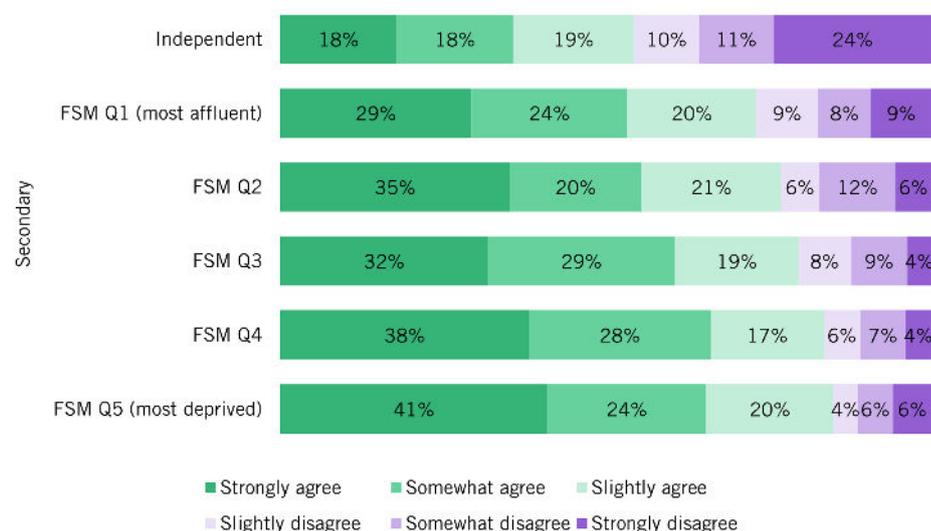
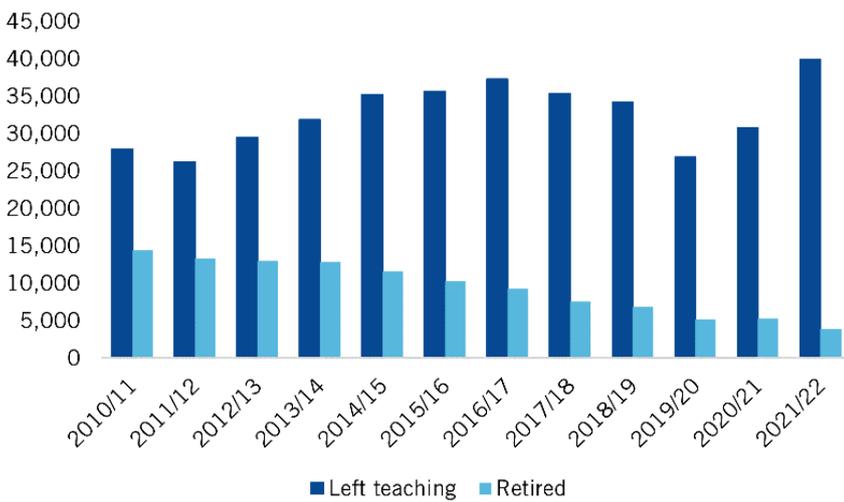


Figure 9: Teacher retention 2010/11 to 2021/22.



Source: Department for Education.

become a serious problem in recent years. Although it is a challenge for schools across the UK,<sup>41</sup> these issues disproportionately affect schools in more deprived areas. Sutton Trust research has found that schools serving disadvantaged communities experience greater recruitment difficulties, particularly in the secondary sector, finding that 85% of teachers in disadvantaged schools said that recruitment was affecting the quality of education in their school. 41% agreed strongly, compared to only 18% in private secondary schools (Figure 8 - see above).<sup>42</sup> The research also found that teachers generally considered schools in disadvantaged areas to be harder to teach in, and teachers in such schools were also more likely to leave the profession.

Disadvantaged schools also have fewer teachers with relevant teaching qualifications.<sup>44</sup> This situation is particularly acute in the core subjects of maths and science, where schools with the largest numbers of disadvantaged pupils are the least likely to have teachers with relevant science qualifications.

A recent report from the DfE itself found that a quarter (25%) of teachers and leaders reported that they were considering leaving the state school sector in the next 12 months for reasons other than retirement, with the problem worse (28%) in the secondary sector. The most commonly cited reasons for considering leaving were 'high workload (92%), government

initiatives or policy changes (76%), and other pressures relating to pupil outcomes or inspection (69%).<sup>45</sup>

Recent research by the teachers' wellbeing charity Education Support found that recruitment and retention difficulties often feed into a vicious cycle that directly affects pupils' learning experiences in the classroom. School leaders reported that if teachers leave and the school struggles to recruit a replacement then that puts pressure on the remaining staff to cover the lessons of missing colleagues. The lack of continuity in teaching leads to demotivation and behavioural issues among pupils. This in turn leads to additional stress among teachers and staff whose well-being decreases. Teachers may then sign off sick or leave the profession or the school, leading to further shortages.<sup>46</sup>

### **"Sutton Trust research has shown over nearly two decades that pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to attend a top performing comprehensive school."**

As Figure 9 shows, the number of teachers leaving the profession has soared since the pandemic and stands at the highest rate in over a decade. Furthermore, whereas ten years ago around a third of teachers

leaving the profession was through retirement, in 2021/22 this was less than 10%. What is more, in 2023 the government missed its teacher recruitment target by 38% overall and as much as 50% in secondary schools.<sup>47</sup>

#### **Social segregation in schools**

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. In the average grammar school in 2021/22, only 5.7% of pupils were eligible for FSM compared to 22% in the average comprehensive. And there are 9.2 percentage points fewer FSM pupils in the average grammar school compared to their catchment areas.<sup>48</sup>

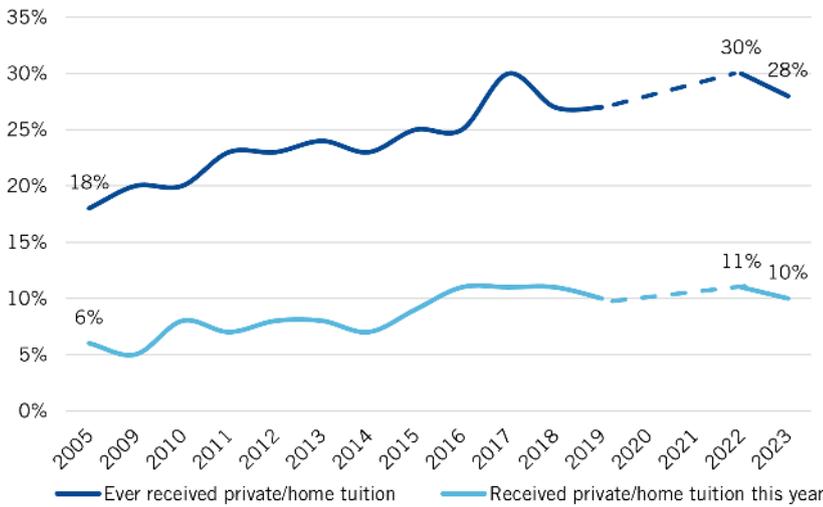
Sutton Trust research has shown over nearly two decades that pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to attend a top performing comprehensive school.<sup>49</sup> The top comprehensives in England, have fewer FSM eligible pupils in their intakes than in the catchment areas they draw 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.<sup>50</sup> More information on this issue can be found in the Sutton Trust's recent report, [Selective Comprehensives 2024](#).

#### **School absences and the attendance crisis**

One indirect impact of the pandemic on schooling has been a sharp rise in pupil absences and low levels of attendance. School absences have been found to link to low educational attainment,<sup>51</sup> and disadvantaged pupils have been found to have higher rates of absence.

Absence rates in schools in England rose from 4.5% in 2018/19 to 7.4% after the pandemic in 2021/22. Persistent absences (which means pupils missing 10% or more of their possible school sessions) have more than doubled since the pandemic and stood at 22.3% in 2021/22.<sup>52</sup>

Figure 10: Percentage of pupils receiving private tuition. No data available for 2019/20 and 2022/21 due to the pandemic.



The rise amongst FSM pupils between 2019/20 and 2021/22 was nearly 10 percentage points, going up from 23.8% to 33.6%. The increase in absences was also high among non-FSM pupils, from 10.5% to 20%.<sup>53</sup> While rates have increased for both groups post pandemic, given FSM pupils were starting from a higher base, they now have extremely high rates of persistent absences. And while persistent absence rates for non-disadvantaged pupils dropped back slightly in the autumn and spring terms 2022/23 compared to the previous year, for disadvantaged pupils they rose slightly.<sup>54</sup>

DfE research found that pupils with higher attainment across KS2 and KS4 had lower levels of absence than lower attainment pupils and generally, the higher the percentage of sessions missed at either KS2 or KS4, the lower the attainment at the end of that key stage. 83.7% of pupils who missed no sessions over KS4 achieved grades 9 to 4 in English and maths at GCSE while this was only 35.6% of those who were persistently absent. At KS2, 83.9% of pupils with no absences achieved the expected standards compared to 35.6% of those persistently absent.<sup>55</sup>

**"Ultimately, the source of the gap is socio-economic inequality and poverty."**

### Private tutoring

Tutoring is a well-evidenced and highly effective intervention to boost learning.<sup>56</sup> New data from the Sutton Trust, based on polling of students, finds that 28% of pupils have ever received private tutoring.<sup>57</sup> This has been steadily increasing in recent years (see Figure 10),<sup>58</sup> though with a drop of two percentage points between 2022 and 2023, potentially as a result of the cost of living crisis.

Nonetheless, there are large gaps in access to private tutoring by socio-economic background. 39% of pupils in the best-off homes had ever received private tutoring compared to just 22% in the worst-off homes.

### Family attitudes and backgrounds

Although poverty and material deprivation are core factors perpetuating the attainment gap, research has also shown that other aspects of family background, including parental values and attitudes, are also important factors.

Cultural and social capital refer to the advantages that children from middle-class backgrounds enjoy in addition to better material resources and that are also generally associated with better educational outcomes.<sup>59</sup> Cultural capital refers to the cultural resources that middle class children often have greater access to compared to working class children, such as books and magazines in the home, more visits to museums, art galleries and other cultural contexts. These are often attributed higher

value in the education system which is broadly based on middle-class values and expectations.

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 more easily in the education system, for instance through first hand advice and insights into certain education or career pathways. Higher social capital is also associated with higher educational attainment.<sup>60</sup>

Sutton Trust research has documented the key role that parents play in the educational development of their children, from academic support and advice to generally managing their way through the system, and that 'these influences differ substantially according to the social class of the parent, limiting the social, cultural and financial capital they can pass on to their children.'<sup>61</sup>

### WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT THE ATTAINMENT GAP?

Ultimately the source of the gap is socio-economic inequality and poverty. Consequently, the best way to reduce educational differences based on poverty is to reduce the poverty itself. However, it is vital that the education system works to mitigate the effects of poverty as much as possible. Without concerted action in schools, gaps in life chances would likely be even wider.

### School funding

A 2017 evidence review by the Department of Education concluded that additional funding in schools does, on existing evidence, appear to positively influence attainment, and that the impact is greatest for students eligible for free school meals.<sup>62</sup>

One of the main ways in which schools with more disadvantaged intakes are given additional funding is via the Pupil Premium, whereby funding is attached to individual students who have been eligible for free school meals in the past 6 years, or those currently or previously looked after by a local authority. The funding is designed to be used on interventions for these students,

based on evidence of what works. However, in recent years Pupil Premium funding has failed to keep up with inflation, having effectively reduced in value by 10% between 2014-15 and 2021-22.<sup>63</sup>

There have also recently been major changes in how government determines funding for different schools and in different areas of the country. In 2018, the government introduced the National Funding Formula. Changes included the introduction of a minimum funding level for schools, smoothing measures to protect schools in areas with changing demographics from sudden budget cuts, the centralisation of funding decisions and a greater focus on low prior attainment rather than high deprivation. These changes have benefitted schools in less deprived areas compared to the previous method of allocation. Back in 2013/14, the most deprived schools received 30% more funding than the least deprived, but this had fallen to just 20% in 2021/22, in part driven by the NFF reforms.<sup>64</sup>

## **"The next government should reform school funding, to rebalance funds back towards schools serving the most disadvantaged communities."**

The gap in spending between the state and private sectors has also been increasing over time, as spending in state schools has failed to keep pace with inflation, and private school investment has outpaced it, with the gap in spending per pupil doubling from £3,500 per pupil in 2010 to £8,000 in 2022-23.<sup>65</sup>

The next government should reform school funding, to rebalance funds back towards schools serving the most disadvantaged communities, and better reflect the level of need faced by schools by taking into account persistent disadvantage. There should also be a real terms restoration of Pupil Premium funding.

To bring Pupil Premium back up to 2014/15 levels, had the funding increased by inflation, would equate to approximately £1,700 for primary and £1,200 for secondary pupils in 2024 prices.<sup>66</sup>

However, what schools actually do with the money is also crucial, so government should also continue to invest in building the evidence base on what works, to help schools to spend Pupil Premium funding effectively. And in the long term, government should look to increase overall investment in state schools, avoid the real terms cuts we've seen in the last decade, and reduce the gap in funding between the state and private sectors.

### **Excellent teachers and teaching**

Ensuring all children, but particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have access to high quality teaching is vital.<sup>67</sup> The next government should look at a range of measures to incentivise more teachers into the profession generally, and the best teachers to work in the most disadvantaged schools. To do so will require reforms across the system, including financial incentives, increased flexibility, and changes to the accountability system.

On financial incentives, the current Conservative government is already taking some positive steps, for example by offering tax-free bursaries and scholarships in subjects facing particular recruitment issues.<sup>68</sup> Their Levelling Up Premium also offers up to £3,000 tax-free per year to teachers of maths, physics, chemistry and computer science who go to work in disadvantaged schools (determined jointly by the proportion of students eligible for Pupil Premium, and whether or not the school is in an Education Investment Area).<sup>69</sup> Government should look at expanding these schemes, including increasing the amount given, expanding the bursaries to more subjects, and making them available in more areas.

### **The National Tutoring Programme**

The National Tutoring Programme (NTP), was set up during the pandemic as part of government funded catch-up efforts.

## **"There is a real risk that without continued funding, the huge progress that has been made on access to tutoring through schools will be lost, and a vital means of narrowing the gap squandered."**

The programme has had a considerable impact on levelling out access to tutoring, with 35% of working class Year 11 students receiving private or school-based tutoring, compared to 36% of students from professional homes.<sup>70</sup> More information on the history and impact of the National Tutoring Programme can be found in the recent Sutton Trust report, [Tutoring – The New Landscape](#).

New data shows that 27% of pupils on free school meals received tutoring from their school in 2023. However, it has recently been reported that the programme is set to be axed, with schools instead expected to pay for tutoring for students out of Pupil Premium funds. Yet many schools are already being forced to make cuts to essentials like teaching assistants, and Pupil Premium funding is already being used to plug gaps in general budgets.<sup>71</sup> There is a real risk that without continued funding, the huge progress that has been made on access to tutoring through schools will be lost, and a vital means of narrowing the gap squandered.

### **Fair admissions**

As outlined here and in the Sutton Trust's recent report, [Selective Comprehensives 2024](#), many of the highest performing state comprehensives are highly socially selective. That same report lays out in detail potential changes to the admissions system to alter this balance. This includes the need for the next government to review the school admissions code, such as making the Pupil Premium a required part of a school's oversubscription criteria. A less socially segregated system is likely to aid efforts to narrow the gap.

## School absences and the attendance crisis

The recent rise in school absences is not fully understood, and is likely due to a combination of interacting factors, including anxiety and mental health related issues, a cultural shift in expectations around attendance post pandemic, and potentially a rise in poverty-related issues including food insecurity for families during the cost of living crisis.

The Government has recently announced additional efforts to tackle persistent absences, including 18 new attendance hubs (bringing the total up to 32). Attendance hubs are run by schools with high levels of attendance, who share ideas on ways to improve attendance with other schools. The Government has also announced intensive support for 10,000 pupils and their families through attendance mentors.<sup>72</sup> Home visits have been effective in the US.<sup>73</sup>

A range of different potential interventions have been suggested to tackle the issue, including making

current government guidance on attendance statutory, to ensure it is acted upon so that parents and children who need it can access support, an increase in mental health support in schools,<sup>74</sup> ensuring all schools have a clear attendance policy,<sup>75</sup> and additional support for disadvantaged students; such as extending free school meal eligibility.<sup>76</sup>

## "Children cannot learn effectively when hungry."

### Tackling hunger in schools

Children cannot learn effectively when hungry. The next government should put in place interventions to end hunger in schools, including expanding free school meal eligibility.

The current income cap excludes 1.7 million children in families eligible for Universal Credit (UC), with evidence that families who are eligible for UC are six times more likely to be classified as food insecure than ineligible families.

The IFS have estimated an expansion to this group would cost about £1 billion per year, which would be a considerably cheaper, and better targeted option than universalising free school meals to all children (which would have a cost of roughly £2.5 billion per year).<sup>77</sup>

Giving free school meals to all families on UC, would also be easier for parents to understand, and therefore likely increase take up rates.

Breakfast clubs, whereby students are given a healthy breakfast when they first arrive at school, are another evidenced backed intervention to tackle hunger in schools. Evaluations by the EEF (Education Endowment Foundation) have previously found positive impact of this type of intervention on attainment.<sup>78</sup> The government are currently running a national school breakfast club programme, available to schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged students. This programme should be expanded, to ensure breakfast clubs are available to all children that need them.

## CONCLUSION

As we approach the next general election, there is a need for a renewed political focus on the attainment gap. While progress had previously been made, these efforts had stalled pre-pandemic. And since then, the crisis and associated school closures have had a major impact, with 10 years of progress in closing the attainment gap lost. A failure to act now risks not only wasting the talent of individual young people, but also damaging the wider economy.

As outlined throughout this briefing, the current government has taken some positive steps towards closing the attainment gap, including efforts to tackle the teacher retention and recruitment crisis, and their ongoing efforts to tackle the absence crisis. However, recent reports that the National Tutoring Programme will end this summer are of serious concern. Ending the programme, which has been highly successful in widening access to tutoring to young people from lower income families, would mean the dismantling of one of the Conservatives' major recent achievements while in office.

## "A failure to act now risks not only wasting the talent of individual young people, but also damaging the wider economy."

Looking across to the Labour party, it is promising to see their focus on closing the attainment gap within the party's Opportunity Mission, one of their five main priority areas. The mission includes a focus on teacher recruitment and retention, and a promise of breakfast clubs in every primary school. However, more detail is needed on Labour's plans, and they have so far failed to commit, for example, to a continuation of tutoring in schools, or to an expansion of free school meals.

Given the scale of the problem, there is clearly more to be done by both major parties to develop a comprehensive strategy, both inside and outside of schools, to close the attainment gap. The next government has a major opportunity not just to open up opportunities for young people, but also to benefit the UK economy in the long-term, by giving every student the chance to fulfil their potential.

## Appendix - current eligibility for Free School Meals in England

The UK government provides free school meals to all Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 children attending state primary schools in England. From Year 3 onwards, pupils may be able to get free school meals if their parents or carers receive any of the following:

- Income support
- Income-based job-seeker's Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- The guaranteed element of Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided they are not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)
- Working Tax Credit run-on - paid for 4 weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit
- Universal Credit – (for those who applied on or after 1 April 2018 household income must be less than £7,400 a year after tax and not including any benefits)

Children with parents with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) are also able to access free school meals, if they meet certain criteria, including having less than £16,000 in savings or investments, the parents being able to work, and being on a low household income.

Pupils in local authorities in London will also receive free school meals for all primary school children beyond Year 2 up until the end of the 2024-25 academic year. Different rules apply in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

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