

## Policy needs to ensure that children from poorer backgrounds are not left behind academically

*Chris Wellings discusses research into the effect of children's economic background on school performance. It shows that children from poorer backgrounds tend to perform worse than their wealthier peers whether they are in a strong or a weak school. We need to focus interventions early and at the pupil level to close the gap.*



Children's background should not limit the opportunities they have in life. However, as things stand children from poorer homes do worse educationally than their classmates. Last year 34 per cent of pupils on free schools achieved 5 good GCSEs, compared to 62 per cent of better-off pupils.

We therefore supported the Institute for Public Policy Research to carry out new data analysis into the achievement gap at GCSE level. The [resulting paper](#) from the IPPR was published recently while Save the Children's summary briefing can be found [here](#).

Firstly, the research found that school improvement strategies have a key role to play in closing the achievement gap, but on their own they will be insufficient. Children from deprived areas would benefit most from more higher-quality schools (pupils from the 25 per cent most deprived postcodes score on average 4Bs and 4Cs at GCSE in outstanding schools compared to an average of 4Cs and 4Ds in an inadequate school) but those from wealthier postcodes would also do better. As a result absolute scores would increase across the board but much of the achievement gap would remain. Even if every child attended an outstanding school the educational achievement gap between the wealthiest and poorest pupils would only be cut by a fifth.

In fact the IPPR analysis shows that children from poorer backgrounds tend to perform worse than their wealthier peers whether they are in a strong or a weak school. This shows that to close the gap we need to focus some of our efforts at the pupil (rather than the institution) level so that we close the achievement gap within each school. The Pupil Premium could provide the sort of targeted interventions we need but it must be spent on approaches that are proven to tackle low achievement.

Secondly, the research found that around half of the achievement gap we see at GCSE level is already present by the time children enter secondary school. This shows that the early years and primary schools have a pivotal role to play in closing the gap. We must do more to ensure every child starts school ready to succeed and because the positive impact from early years interventions can fade over time we must sustain this progress while children are at school.

Intensive catch-up programmes as children transition from primary to secondary schools should be available for pupils falling behind. This is the approach taken in world-class systems such as Finland, where nearly half of pupils receive some catch-up tuition over their school life. The alternative is that from age 11 onwards these children will have to make equal progress with their peers simply to maintain existing performance gaps.

Thirdly, the research provided some important insights into the nature of the educational achievement gap. It showed there is a clear and consistent relationship between deprivation and academic achievement at GCSE level – the trend holds across the scale of deprivation. This problem cannot be neatly divided into the achievements of children from poorer homes and the rest. It showed that the education gap is not just about pupils failing to get the top grades, but is also characterised by a long tail of low achievement. Estimates suggest that closing the gap will require a bigger improvement in grades at the lower end of the distribution than at the top end of the distribution.

The conclusions are clear. School improvement strategies are vital because all children do better in higher-quality schools and alongside raising overall performance they can also close some of the gap. However, to close more of the gap we also need to focus some of our efforts on pupil-level interventions targeted at children from poor homes in every school. The Pupil Premium is a good mechanism for this but the government must ensure the resources are spent on approaches that are proven to work. Approximately half of the achievement gap that we see at GCSE level is evident before those children entered secondary school. We therefore need a whole-system approach to narrowing the gap that combines early years reforms with a focus on the primary and secondary years and we must ensure intensive catch-up programmes are available at key points.

Finally, the education gap debate must recognise that there is a consistent relationship between deprivation and low achievement across the scale of deprivation and that the problem is characterised by a long tail of low achievement as well as pupils from poorer homes failing to get the very top grades.

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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