Department for Education

Supporting the attainment of disadvantaged pupils

Briefing for school leaders

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Caroline Sharp, Shona Macleod and Daniele Bernardinelli, National Foundation for Educational Research

Amy Skipp, Ask Research

Steve Higgins, Durham University

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Foreword by Sam Gyimah MP

As the Minister responsible for the pupil premium, I was delighted to see this headteachers' briefing note, summarising the research conducted by NFER on behalf of the Department for Education. The note is a valuable source of evidence about tackling under-achievement among disadvantaged pupils, and provides us all with an opportunity to consider how to have the greatest impact with pupil premium funding.

The National Audit Office's recent review of funding for disadvantaged pupils recognises the impact of the pupil premium in focusing attention on raising disadvantaged pupils' attainment. It is clear, however, that there is more to do. For example, in 2014, only 36.5 per cent of disadvantaged pupils achieved 5 A*-C including English and maths GCSEs, compared with 64.0 per cent of other pupils.

As the NFER research shows, many schools are overcoming the barriers to attainment faced by their disadvantaged pupils. The lack of progress in other schools suggests that they are not using their pupil premium funding effectively, especially for their more able disadvantaged pupils. Recent reports published by Ofsted and the Sutton Trust support this view, highlighting that too many disadvantaged pupils who do very well early on later fail to meet their potential in their GCSEs.

Successful schools have a clear vision for what all their pupils will achieve through high quality teaching, with an ethos that reinforces aspiration and attainment for all. They realise the importance of getting the basics right, like attendance and behaviour, and understand that failing to put these building blocks in place will undermine the effectiveness of the pupil premium in raising standards. Successful schools adopt a whole school approach to their use of the pupil premium that delivers on the full potential of every pupil, including nurturing their more able pupils to excel. Successful schools deploy the best staff to support their most disadvantaged pupils, and use their resources to develop the skills and roles of their teachers and teaching assistants.

Irrespective of where a school is on its journey it can always go further. In addition to reflecting on the advice in this briefing I would encourage schools to consider

commissioning a pupil premium review; the NCTL website maintains a list of reviewers. I also hope that successful schools, including the pupil premium award winners, will look for opportunities to help other schools on their journey, using the pupil premium in ways that raise standards for all.

Sam Gyimah MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Childcare and Education

About this briefing

This briefing was written by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and is based on national research with primary, secondary and special schools across England. The research was conducted for the Department for Education by NFER. The research team analysed national performance data for disadvantaged pupils (defined as pupils eligible for the pupil premium at the time of the research) and identified schools where disadvantaged pupils were making more or less progress than expected, given the characteristics of the pupils and schools. The team sent a survey to more and less successful primary and secondary schools in 2015: 1,329 schools responded to the survey and 49 school leaders from primary, secondary and special schools took part in interviews.

Why is it so important to ensure disadvantaged pupils achieve their full potential?

The educational performance of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (commonly defined in terms of family socio-economic status) is much lower than their peers, and England has a relatively large achievement gap among countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

There has been good progress in the absolute attainment of poorer children in the last few years, with twice as many pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) achieving five good GCSEs including English and mathematics in 2013 than in 2005. But the achievement of other pupils has also improved and so the attainment gap has only narrowed slightly. In 2014, only 36.5 per cent of disadvantaged pupils achieved 5 A*-C including English and maths GCSEs, compared with 64.0 per cent of all other pupils.

Recognising the need to improve the performance of disadvantaged pupils, the Government introduced the pupil premium in 2011. This allocates specific funding to schools for each pupil from a disadvantaged background[1].

Disadvantage has a big influence on pupils' life chances. As the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission's 2014 'State of the Nation' report highlights, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are: twice as likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) and at higher risk of ending up in poverty as adults.

[1] Including pupils eligible for FSM within the past six years and pupils looked after by the local authority. For more details of eligibility, please see https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2010-to-2015-government-policy-education-of-disadvantaged-children/

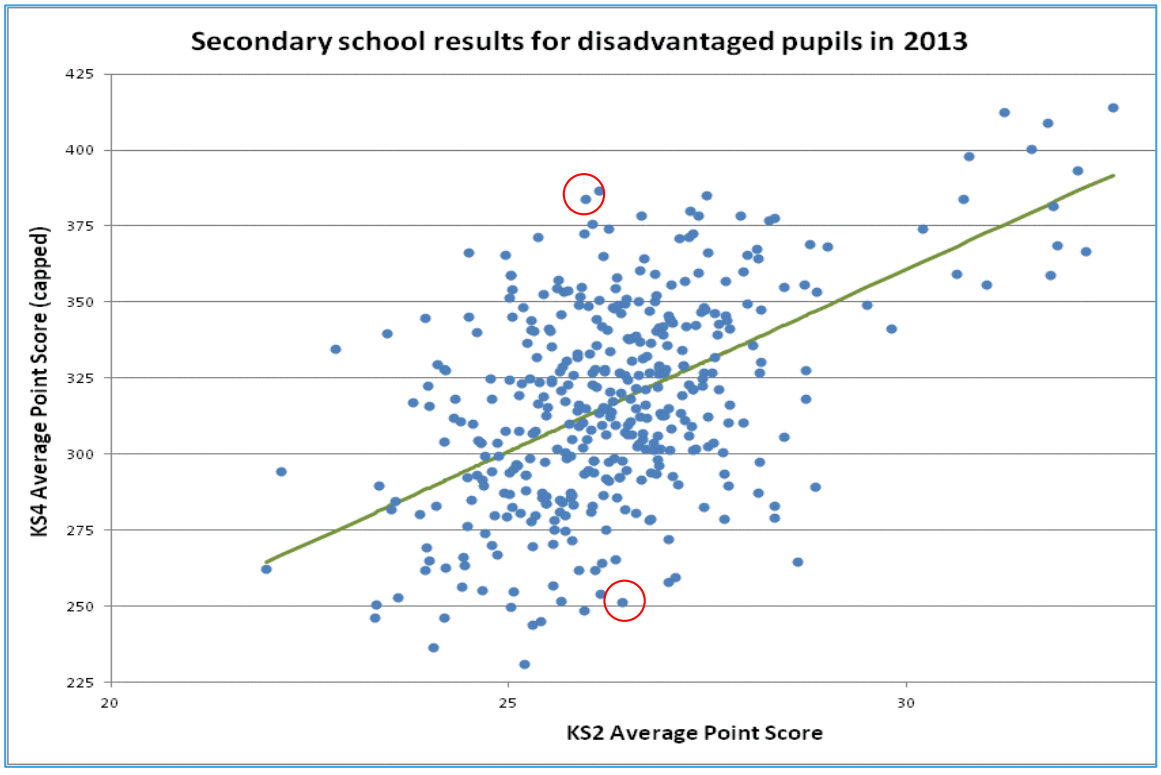
Pupils of all abilities are affected. A report published by the Sutton Trust estimates that around 7,000 pupils each year who were in the top ten per cent at age 11 fail to achieve in the top 25 per cent at GCSE: boys and pupils eligible for the pupil premium are most likely to be in this 'missing talent' group.

> *Put simply, a child's socio-economic background – things they can't choose like the street they grew up on and how much their parents earn – have too much of an impact on how well they do at school and the choices they have later in life.*
>
> Teach First website

But it doesn't have to be like this. Schools can help break the link between disadvantage and performance by supporting disadvantaged pupils to achieve their full potential.

The following chart illustrates how differently schools perform[2]. The diagonal line shows the relationship between the average attainment of disadvantaged pupils at Key Stage 2 and the attainment of disadvantaged pupils at Key Stage 4.

Figure 1: Secondary school results for disadvantaged pupils



Source: NFER analysis of national performance data

[2] The chart shows results for a representative sample of 400 schools nationally, selected to include schools across the full range of performance. Note that there was a similar range of results among primary schools at Key Stage 2.

Each dot represents a school: the higher the dot is above the diagonal line, the better the progress of their disadvantaged pupils (and the further below the line, the worse the progress of their disadvantaged pupils). The red circles show the large difference in disadvantaged pupils' average attainment in two schools where disadvantaged pupils had similar results at Key Stage 2. This demonstrates that some schools are doing much better than others with a similar intake.

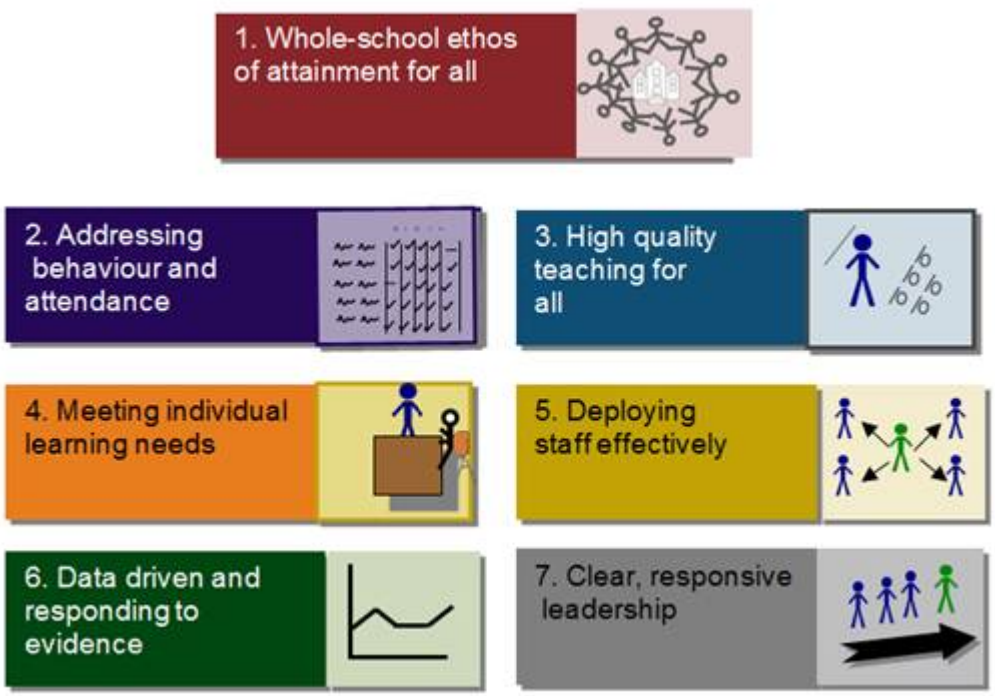
> *If all secondary schools did as well as the best performing school with a similar intake (based on attainment at age 11 of pupils entering the school), the number of pupils achieving five good GCSEs including English and maths would be 37 percent higher.*

Social Mobility Commission (2014b, p. iv)

What is the most effective way to support disadvantaged pupils' achievement?

Based on interviews with senior leaders from more and less successful primary, secondary and special schools, the NFER research found that schools which are more successful in promoting high attainment have a number of things in common. It identified seven building blocks of success.

Figure 2: Building blocks for success



1. Whole school ethos of attainment for all

More successful schools have an ethos of high attainment for all pupils. They view each pupil as an individual and consciously avoid stereotyping disadvantaged pupils by referring to them as a group – they never assume that all disadvantaged pupils face similar barriers or have less potential to succeed.

> *Our targets have always been to ensure that groups of disadvantaged students are doing as well as other groups of students.*
>
> (Assistant headteacher, more successful secondary school)

2. Addressing behaviour and attendance

Pupils have to be in school and able to pay attention before they can access learning. More successful schools make sure they have really effective behaviour strategies: communicating simple, clear rules and training all staff in behaviour management. They also have strong social and emotional support strategies to help pupils in need of additional support, including through working with their families. Similarly, more successful schools set up rapid response systems to address poor attendance. This includes staff contacting home immediately a pupil fails to arrive on time. If the problem persists, staff work with families to address any barriers they face in getting their children to school.

3. High quality teaching for all

Leaders of more successful schools emphasise the importance of 'quality teaching first'. They aim to provide a consistently high standard, through setting expectations, monitoring performance, tailoring teaching and support to suit their pupils and sharing best practice. This approach is supported by a body of research[3] which has found that good teachers are especially important for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

> *For poor pupils the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher is a whole year's learning.*

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[3] See Sutton Trust (2011) and Social Mobility Commission (2014b)

Sutton Trust (2011, p. 2)

4. Meeting individual learning needs

More successful schools see pupils as individuals, each with their own challenges, talents and interests. Staff work to identify what might help each pupil make the next steps in their learning, whether they are performing below, at, or above expectations. They focus on providing targeted support for under-performing pupils during curriculum time (as well as providing learning support outside school hours). They seek out strategies best suited to addressing individual needs, rather than simply fitting pupils into their existing support strategies. These schools tend to provide both individual support for pupils that have very specific learning needs, and group support for pupils with similar needs.

> *Don't just target PP kids. Let them work with other students so there is an impact on both groups; but the group that benefits the most is the PP kids.*
>
> (Headteacher, more successful secondary school)

5. Deploying staff effectively

More successful schools identify the strengths of each member of staff and find the best ways to use them. They are quick to spot potential and 'grow their own staff'. They devolve as much responsibility as possible to frontline staff and deploy their best teachers to work with pupils who need the most support, such as those in the lower sets. They ensure that teaching assistants (TAs) are well trained in supporting pupils' learning as well as in specific learning interventions, so TAs can provide effective support to individual pupils or small groups. They also ensure strong teamwork between teachers and support staff.

6. Data driven and responding to evidence

More successful schools use data to identify pupils' learning needs at every opportunity – when pupils join the school, during regular reviews of progress and during day-to-day teaching. They review progress every few weeks, spot any signs of underperformance and address them quickly. Teachers engage with the data themselves: they input, analyse and use it to underpin their teaching. More successful schools have a consistent marking scheme which recognises pupils' achievements and sets out the next steps in their learning. Pupils are given time to review their feedback and discuss their progress with teachers. More successful schools also monitor the success of their support

strategies and make evidence-based decisions about whether these are proving effective, need adjustment or should be replaced.

7. Clear, responsive leadership

Senior leaders in more successful schools ensure that staff are willing to do whatever it takes to help each pupil to succeed. They hold every staff member accountable for pupils' progress. They train staff to provide high quality feedback to pupils and adopt the same approach themselves when providing feedback to staff.

> *We have a culture of transparency and active learning, so when I do school walks and lesson observations I give feedback instantly, on the spot in a constructive way, the same as I'd expect them to be doing for students. Teachers are important learners in our school too.*
>
> (Senior leader, more successful secondary school)

Senior leaders in more successful schools tend to share their thinking and work collaboratively with staff, pupils, parents, families and the local community. They ensure their schools are linked into a number of networks such as local school clusters, teaching school networks, online forums and national education events. They constantly seek out new ideas and put systems in place for staff to share best practice.

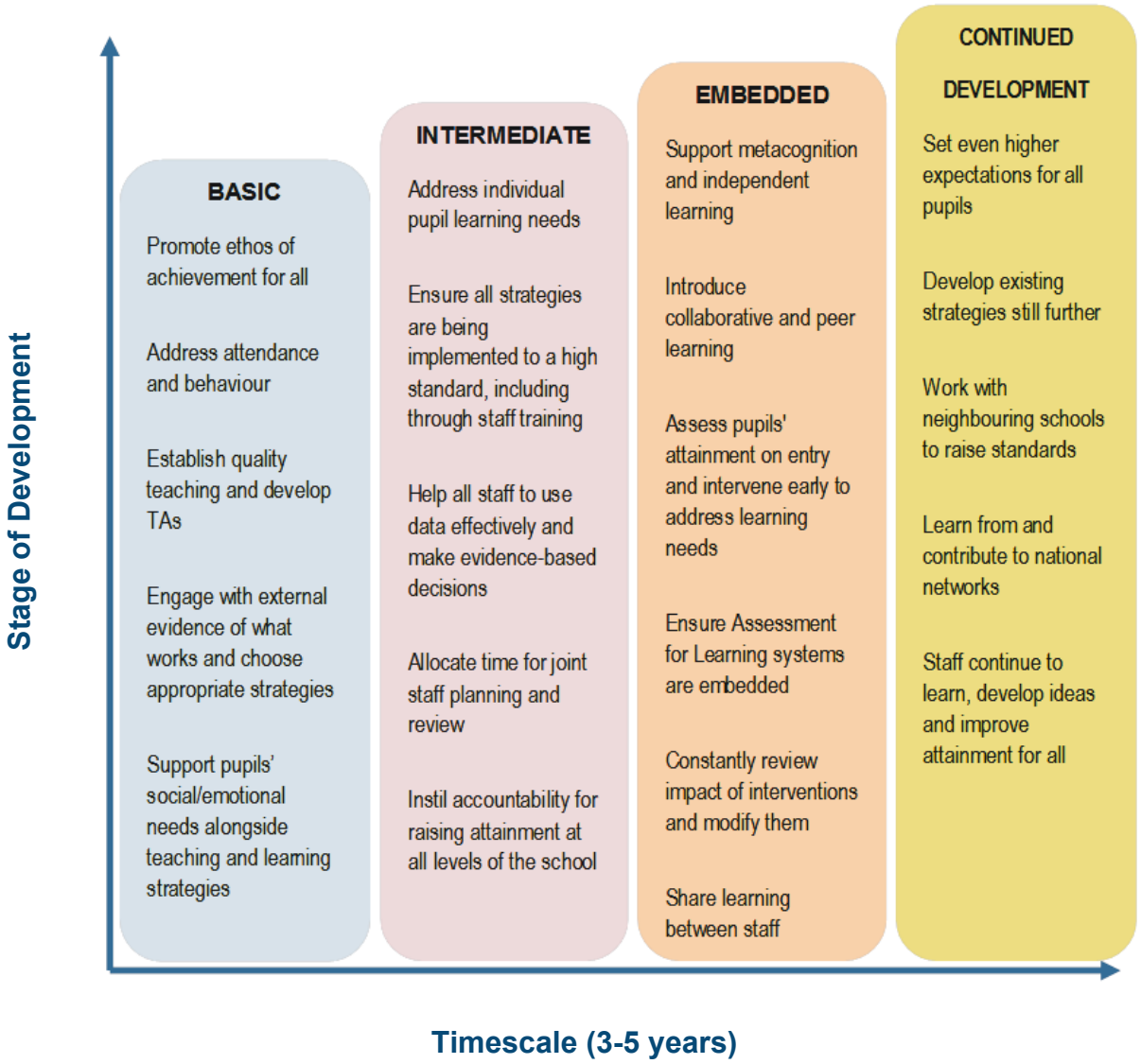
Taking stock of your school's approach

Leaders of more successful schools typically described embarking on their improvement journey some years ago. Several started by referring to the EEF/Sutton Trust Teaching and Learning Toolkit.

> *We've talked through the ideas in the Toolkit together. I want them [staff] to really think about ideas and what would work with our pupils. From the start I was really driving this change, but I knew it was no good unless I took them all with me.*
>
> (Senior leader, more successful secondary school)

Based on survey responses and interviews linked to performance results, the research identified common elements in a school's 'pathway' to success.

Figure 3: Schools' pathways to success in raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils



Leaders in more successful schools know that there are no simple or quick answers to helping disadvantaged pupils achieve their potential.

> *We needed to find an approach that worked for everyone [individually]. And then we needed the confidence to follow that course, give it a go and keep a close eye on it so we could change anything which wasn't working out.*
>
> (Senior leader, more successful primary school)

Not everything they had tried had been successful and changes had not paid off overnight – but they had a shared focus on the issue and a determination to address it. Less successful schools were at an earlier stage in this journey, still grappling with some of the issues that more successful schools had already addressed.

One of the common starting points is to focus on attendance and behaviour alongside high quality teaching, as part of a whole-school commitment to helping each pupil to succeed. Schools at an intermediate stage have taken several of the actions associated with more successful practice, but these have yet to become established as part of their systems and practice. They are focusing on addressing individual pupils' needs, improving the quality of their support strategies and starting to get to grips with their data. The third stage requires schools to embed their strategies throughout the school. This enables them to focus more strongly on early intervention, lessening the need for intensive 'drilling' for pupils approaching their end of key stage assessments.

> *This is the first school that [a new teacher] had ever worked in where the children actually came into Year 6 and were on track.*
>
> (Senior leader, more successful primary school)

Metacognition (i.e. teaching pupils to be aware of and understand their own thought processes), collaborative learning and peer tutoring strategies feature in the third stage, as these tend to be associated with schools at a later stage on the pathway to success. These strategies have good evidence of effectiveness and are inexpensive, yet they are used by a relatively low proportion of schools. At the final stage, schools are in a position to continually seek opportunities for improvement, contribute to local and national networks and share their learning with other schools. Even though their disadvantaged pupils are achieving good results, they continue to challenge themselves and are keen to develop their systems and approaches still further.

What more can schools do to support disadvantaged pupils?

Schools can respond to the complexity of disadvantaged pupils' needs by tackling the challenge at three levels:

1. A whole-school approach promoting learning which sets high aspirations for all pupils
2. Strategies to identify and support under-performing pupils (not just low attainers)
3. Strategies specifically targeted at supporting pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It's not just what you do; it's also the way that you do it. Schools can improve their effectiveness by focusing on the depth and quality of their support strategies. The Pupil Premium Awards provide case studies of good practice. Here are some examples from our research.

Table 1: Support strategies for schools

Small group additional teaching	
Less successful school	**More successful school**
Struggling pupils are taken out of English lessons to work on an online literacy programme, supervised by a TA who has received no specific training.	Pupils with similar needs are withdrawn from alternating non-core curriculum lessons for tailored support from a TA trained in literacy interventions.
Parental involvement	
Less successful school	**More successful school**
Staff provide pupils with homework books showing the day's assignments. Pupils take the books home. There is space for teachers and parents to leave comments about pupils' progress.	Higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs) visit community centres to talk to parents about the importance of learning. They show parents the curriculum pupils are covering and explain how parents can support their child to achieve.
Improving feedback between teachers and pupils	
Less successful school	**More successful school**
Teachers give pupils grades for their work.	The school has developed marking schemes which identify each pupil's strengths, areas to focus on and next steps. Pupils have time allotted during the lesson or tutor time to respond to the feedback and discuss it with teachers.

What can school leaders do?

Leaders can adopt specific behaviours to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in their school.

Set expectations. Senior leaders in more successful schools consistently communicate their expectation that all pupils have the potential to succeed and the school will help all pupils to achieve their full potential. They expect commitment from staff and pupils alike. They follow through by observing teaching and checking on pupil progress.

> *It is about all staff knowing who their students are and having high aspirations for them*.

(Headteacher, more successful secondary school)

Lead by example and accept no excuses. Senior leaders in more successful schools reinforce the urgency and importance of support for disadvantaged pupils. They set a culture of openness and high performance, do not accept excuses and encourage staff to work through any barriers to success.

Invest in staff. Leaders in more successful schools ensure their staff have the skills and training to take on more specialist roles.

> *Spend it [the pupil premium] on CPD... that is where you'll see the biggest impact because those are the people that are spending the most of the time with the students and they need to know how to be able to teach them.*

(Deputy headteacher, more successful secondary school)

Make creative, evidence-based decisions. Leaders in more successful schools make decisions based on a detailed understanding of their pupils' needs. They adopt the strategies that they think will have the greatest impact, rather than prioritising their ability to account for their school's spending on disadvantaged pupils. They have the confidence to find creative solutions, and to focus on underpinning improvements to the quality of teaching, where necessary.

> *What I wanted to achieve was changing the culture… It wasn't just focusing on short term approaches that would probably get results…in the short term… It was actually saying don't focus on behaviour, focus on learning.*

(Head teacher, more successful special school)

School 'risk factors' and how to address them

As well as identifying the importance of leadership, the research revealed certain school features that are associated with a higher risk of underperformance among disadvantaged pupils. These include: schools with a lower proportion of disadvantaged pupils; schools with larger year groups; and schools where pupils have lower results on entry. Here are some suggestions about why these factors are associated with underperformance and how schools can respond.

- In schools with a lower proportion of disadvantaged pupils and/or larger year groups, there is a danger that disadvantaged pupils may be getting 'lost' in the system. Potential solutions include improved monitoring of progress and providing individualised learning support for disadvantaged pupils.

- In schools with a small number of disadvantaged pupils, staff may have lower expectations of these pupils or conversely avoid exploring their barriers to learning for fear of stigmatising them. These schools are also likely to have less additional funding. Potential solutions include addressing low expectations for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and using inexpensive support strategies such as improving feedback to pupils, peer tutoring and collaborative learning.
- Low attainment in Key Stages 1 and 2 is a strong risk factor for disadvantaged pupils' later attainment. Early identification and intervention are therefore vital to help disadvantaged pupils achieve. Schools need to identify low performance on entry and regularly review individual pupils' performance so they can respond quickly to provide effective support.

Here are some things you could do next:

- Find out where your school ranks among schools with similar intakes
- Review your school's development: do you have all seven building blocks in place?
- Interrogate your own data - what is it telling you about the success of your current support strategies for disadvantaged pupils of all abilities?
- Look at the 'pathways to success' diagram and decide which stage best describes your school. Taking account of your own school's needs and characteristics, are there actions in earlier stages that you might have missed out? Can you take some of the actions in the next stage?
- Consider your own behaviour and actions as a leader: how can you best model and communicate your vision of success for all?

Resources for schools

Use the families of schools tool to compare your disadvantaged pupils' results with those in similar primary and secondary schools: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/families-of-schools/

See how your pupils are performing in relation to national results, using the Ofsted School Data Dashboard, which includes measures for disadvantaged pupils and low attainers in special schools: http://dashboard.ofsted.gov.uk/dash.php?urn=125473

Use the Sutton Trust/EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit to identify evidence-based strategies for raising attainment: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/toolkit-a-z/

Use the Pupil Premium Review Guide to plan, commission and respond to an independent review of your pupil premium funding: http://tscouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Pupil-Premium-Review-Guide-v1-2.pdf

Refer to the following Ofsted reports on schools' use of the pupil premium:

Ofsted (2013). *The Pupil Premium: How Schools are Spending the Funding Successfully to Maximise Achievement* [online]. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413197/The_Pupil_Premium_-_How_schools_are_spending_the_funding.pdf

Ofsted (2014). *The Pupil Premium: an Update* [online]. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/379205/The_20pupil_20premium_20-_20an_20update.pdf

Use the Pupil Premium Awards case studies to find out how the most successful schools are spending their funding to raise disadvantaged pupils' attainment: http://www.pupilpremiumawards.co.uk/ppawards2015/2013

You can find the full details of the research underpinning this briefing on the DfE and NFER websites: www.gov.uk/government/publications and www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/PUPP01

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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at: Christopher.PRICE@education.gsi.gov.uk or www.education.gov.uk/contactus

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