



Rewrite the future

Class dismissed

Closing the gap for
persistently disadvantaged pupils

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Data note

The data in this report was provided by Education Policy Institute (EPI), commissioned by Teach First. Unless referenced with an alternate source, this applies to all data and statistics. For Key Stage 4 attainment, demographics and attendance data, analysis relates to pupils in state-funded schools who completed Key Stage 4 in 2024. For destinations, analysis relates to pupils in state-funded schools who completed Key Stage 4 in 2022. EPI's complementary report, which includes detailed methodology, can be found here: [Complementary report from EPI](#)

This analysis was carried out in the Secure Research Service, part of the Office for National Statistics (ONS). It contains statistical data from ONS which is Crown Copyright. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates.

This report includes analysis of the National Pupil Database (NPD). The Department for Education is responsible for the collation and management of the NPD and is the Data Controller of NPD data. Any inferences or conclusions derived from the NPD in this publication are the responsibility of the Education Policy Institute and Teach First and not the Department for Education.

Key terminology

The below terms will be used throughout this report and are defined as follows:

Disadvantaged

Disadvantaged pupils are pupils who have been eligible for free school meals (FSM) at any point in the last six years (and therefore eligible for pupil premium).

Persistently disadvantaged

Persistently disadvantaged pupils are pupils who have been eligible for FSM for at least 80% of their time in school.

Shorter-term disadvantaged

Shorter-term disadvantaged pupils are pupils who are identified as disadvantaged (eligible for the pupil premium) but have been eligible for FSM for less than 80% of their time in school.

Non-disadvantaged

Non-disadvantaged pupils are pupils who are not eligible for the pupil premium.

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Foreword

By Josh Fisher

Headteacher of Mercia School
2012 Teach First ambassador



No child's potential should be limited by their postcode or their financial circumstances.

Yet for more than one million children in our education system, this is still too often the case. This group of pupils, the 'persistently disadvantaged', face sustained, long-term barriers for the vast majority of their time in school, are more likely than not to fail their maths and English GCSEs, and are three times more likely to not be in education or training after leaving school at 16.

This report brings that reality into sharp focus. It highlights a group of young people for whom the attainment gap is a consistent feature of their educational journey. If we are serious about addressing inequality, we cannot afford for this group to sit at the margins of our thinking any longer.

There is cause for urgency here, but also for optimism. All staff at Mercia School are proud that our school has been identified in this report for closing the gap between persistently disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

Our success reflects years of deliberate, consistent work to ensure that pupils, regardless of their background, are given the knowledge, opportunities, and support they need to succeed. We do not underestimate the considerable challenge this presents to all schools.

At Mercia, and in many other schools identified in this report, we have seen first-hand that poor outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils are not inevitable. With the right approach, pupils who have experienced persistent disadvantage can achieve highly and go on to futures that might once have seemed out of reach. That belief underpins everything we do, and illustrates why the work set out in this report matters.

Recognising persistent disadvantage as a distinct and visible group within our system would be a significant step forward. It would sharpen our understanding of where need is greatest, and help ensure that resources, policy decisions, and school-level strategies are directed accordingly to the very pupils who are in poverty the longest.

Importantly, it would also reinforce a simple but vital principle: that those facing the greatest barriers should be those to whom we give the greatest attention.

We know that progress is possible. We know that schools across the country are already demonstrating what can be achieved. The question is not whether this challenge can be addressed, but whether we are prepared to focus our efforts with the clarity and determination it requires.

Teach First's campaign to shine a light on persistent disadvantage is both timely and necessary. Those of us who have worked in classrooms serving disadvantaged communities understand that change does not come from isolated initiatives or short-term interventions.

If we are to make meaningful progress in closing the attainment gap, we must ensure that persistent disadvantage becomes a central lens through which we view education policy and practice. This report is a welcome and important contribution to that effort. I encourage policymakers, school leaders, and educators alike to engage seriously with its findings.



By Celine Aytekin

Former Mercia School pupil

Currently studying at the University of Manchester

Attending Mercia School as a disadvantaged student changed the trajectory of my life.

From the day I entered Year 7, I felt capable, determined, and committed – values upon which Mercia School is firmly built.

Every teacher made an undoubtable effort to ensure I felt equal and included. As a result, I never felt different from or lesser than my peers; instead, I grew and flourished alongside them. My postcode and being on free school meals became an afterthought as my confidence grew with the unwavering encouragement and support I received from Mr Fisher and the rest of the teaching team.

I wholly attribute my success at the University of Manchester to Mercia School's focus on inclusion, strong ethos and commitment to giving every child the best education possible.

Executive summary

Persistent disadvantage is one of the strongest predictors of poor educational attainment and post-16 outcomes in England. Pupils who experience persistent disadvantage face worse outcomes than their peers and are more likely to leave the education system altogether at age 16.

While the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers narrowed from 2011 to 2019, this did not extend to persistently disadvantaged pupils. And now, with the overall attainment gap having widened since the COVID-19 pandemic, the inequalities continue.

Teach First commissioned new research from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) to better understand the performance of persistently disadvantaged pupils. At a time of rising youth unemployment, record child poverty levels and increased pressures on schools, it's crucial to identify what interventions are needed to ensure these pupils can succeed.

This matters not only for the life chances of individual young people, but for the government's wider ambition to break the link between economic background and success. The Schools White Paper set out a national mission to halve the attainment gap by 2040, while the Milburn Review highlights the urgent need to tackle the growing number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). At the same time, place-based initiatives such as Mission North East and Mission Coastal recognise the entrenched regional inequalities that continue to shape educational outcomes. Yet despite this policy focus, persistently disadvantaged pupils are not currently sufficiently understood or prioritised within national reform efforts.

This paper presents new analysis on:

- The attainment gap of persistently disadvantaged pupils
- Attainment gaps within local authorities and within schools
- Post-16 destinations of persistently disadvantaged pupils
- The relationship between SEN status, disadvantage status, and attainment
- Where persistently disadvantaged pupils are educated

The evidence in this paper makes clear that the scale and persistence of the disadvantage these pupils experience is unlike that of any other group. Alongside the data analysis, the paper also draws on insights from schools to demonstrate the extent of the challenge and to begin exploring how progress can be made.

Key findings*

- One in four (25.5%) persistently disadvantaged pupils will be not in post-16 education or training after Year 11, compared with 9.3% and 18.9% of non-disadvantaged and shorter-term disadvantaged peers respectively.
- In the South West, this rises to one in three (31.5%) young people not in education or training after Year 11.
- There is a 22.4 month learning gap between persistently disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils at the end of Key Stage 4.
- There is a 6.7 month learning gap between shorter-term disadvantaged and persistently disadvantaged pupils at the end of Key Stage 4.
- There are 88 schools where persistently disadvantaged pupils achieve higher grades than the national average for non-disadvantaged pupils.

*All analysis relates to pupils in state-funded schools who completed Key Stage 4 in 2024, apart from destinations data, which relates to pupils in state-funded schools who completed Key Stage 4 in 2022.

- Out of the nine regions, the North East has the highest rate of persistent disadvantage, at 18.6% – the equivalent of 1 in 5 pupils.
- The lowest persistent disadvantage rate is in the South East and the East of England—8.7% and 9.4% respectively.
- 30% of persistently disadvantaged pupils have an identified special educational need, over twice as many as non-disadvantaged pupils (14%).

Recommendations

Make persistent disadvantage visible and drive immediate action

- Establish a clear national definition of persistent disadvantage and embed it across data, accountability and improvement frameworks.
- Publish consistent data on attainment, attendance and post-16 outcomes for this group.
- Identify and actively support schools with the largest disadvantage gaps through targeted improvement programmes and better access to high-performing schools.

Teach First will use the data in this report to place trainees in schools with a high proportion of persistently disadvantaged pupils, and mobilise our community of 20,000 ambassadors to participate in initiatives that improve their outcomes.

Target reform towards the schools and places most affected

- Incentivise strong teachers and leaders to work in schools serving persistently disadvantaged communities, alongside strengthening governance capacity.
- Adapt leadership development to better prepare leaders for complex, high-disadvantage contexts.
- Expand place-based approaches (for example Missions North East and Coastal), ensure they prioritise areas with the widest gaps and measure success by improvements for persistently disadvantaged pupils.

Teach First will launch a Coastal Target Areas pilot programme, working with schools in areas of high persistent disadvantage and low average attainment. Our first programmes will be in Blackpool and Thanet with progress measured by their impact on narrowing the persistent disadvantage gap.

Build a system that responds to long-term disadvantage

- Introduce additional, targeted funding for persistently disadvantaged pupils through a supplementary premium to reflect the scale of the attainment gap.
- Ensure post-16 reforms prioritise this group, including embedding them within NEET prevention measures and transition support.
- Integrate persistent disadvantage into SEND and inclusion reforms, ensuring outcomes are tracked and addressed explicitly.

Teach First will research what works best for closing the attainment gap for persistently disadvantaged pupils by working with partner schools who have already done so and launching a steering committee of school leaders who are doing exceptional work.

Introduction

More than a million children currently in school will spend at least 80% of their school lives in poverty.* This presents profound hurdles to their ability to engage and achieve in school, which in turn impacts their life opportunities afterwards. Yet the cumulative impact of years spent in poverty is not currently acknowledged in education policy.

These pupils consistently demonstrate some of the lowest educational outcomes in England's education system and the highest NEET (not in employment, education or training) rates after leaving secondary school at 16.

This matters not only for the futures of individual young people, but for the government's wider ambitions on opportunity and growth. The Government's Schools White Paper acknowledged the "stubbornly high" gap between persistently disadvantaged pupils and their peers and set out an ambition to halve the attainment gap by 2040. At the same time, the Milburn Review highlights growing concern around rising numbers of young people falling out of education and employment pathways, while place-based initiatives such as Mission North East and Mission Coastal reflect increasing recognition of the regional inequalities shaping outcomes for children and young people. If these ambitions are to be realised, tackling persistent disadvantage must become a central priority of education policy.

Teach First's mission is to end educational inequality. We have consistently argued that tackling disadvantage effectively requires recognising its duration and depth including recommending an additional persistent disadvantage top-up to the pupil premium. [1]

Yet recognition of this group remains limited across the sector. Despite important research by organisations like EPI [2] and FFT Education Datalab [3], there is still too little understanding of the challenges these pupils face today, and crucially the interventions that help them to succeed.

In response, Teach First commissioned EPI to build a clearer picture of persistently disadvantaged pupils in England: who they are; where they are located; and how they are performing across the system. The findings demonstrate the scale and persistence of the disadvantage they experience are unlike that of any other group.

We found that by the time they reach their GCSEs, persistently disadvantaged pupils are, on average, nearly two years of learning behind their peers, including nearly seven months behind the rest of the disadvantaged cohort of pupils who experience shorter-term poverty.

The consequences are most visible at the point young people complete compulsory schooling. Our new research shows a quarter of these pupils are not in education or training a year after they finish Year 11. In effect, many of the pupils who have faced the deepest and longest poverty fall outside the education system entirely at 16, at precisely the stage where pathways into skills, qualifications and employment should be opening up. This means thousands of young people are being left behind each year, with serious implications for their futures and for wider national ambitions around opportunity, skills and economic growth.

More than a million children currently in school will spend at least 80% of their school lives in poverty.

Many of the pupils who have faced the deepest and longest poverty fall outside the education system entirely at 16.

* Estimated by applying 12.9% to the current number of pupils in state-funded schools.

This pattern is not uniform across the country. In a number of local authorities, post-16 non-participation rates for persistently disadvantaged pupils exceed 40%, while several London boroughs record rates below 12%. These disparities point to a postcode lottery with significant differences in local opportunities. However, even in the highest performing areas, persistently disadvantaged pupils continue to lag behind their peers in both attainment and post-16 destinations. It is unacceptable, and we need radical intervention to change their outcomes.

But the data also offers scope for optimism. In 88 schools, persistently disadvantaged pupils are achieving better grades than the national average for non-disadvantaged pupils, demonstrating that the outcomes for this group are not inevitable.

In this report, Teach First has spotlighted a number of Teach First partner schools, where persistently disadvantaged pupils outperform the national average for non-disadvantaged pupils. These case studies show what school leaders can achieve; with the right support and interventions, futures can be rewritten, and the gap can be closed.

Recognising persistently disadvantaged pupils as a distinct group matters. Doing so enables policymakers and the sector to track their progress, set clear targets for their improvement and design targeted support to mitigate the effects of long-term poverty. It is therefore welcome that the Government's Schools White Paper acknowledges the stubbornness of the gap between persistently disadvantaged pupils and non-disadvantaged pupils:

"The gap between the attainment of children with the most long-term disadvantage and their non-disadvantaged peers has remained stubbornly high, even in the years when the overall attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children was narrowing." [4]

With the Government currently reviewing how disadvantage in education is defined, this is a crucial moment to deepen our understanding of persistent disadvantage. If the Government is to meet its target of halving the attainment gap by 2040, improving outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils must be central to that mission.

No child's future should be determined by the poverty they grow up in. We must confront persistent disadvantage directly and ensure the education system works for the pupils who need it most.

While the data in this report shows the urgency of this issue, it does not show us why these gaps exist or what solutions there are to eliminate them. Teach First is committed to working with schools, policymakers and the wider education sector to answer these questions and bring about the changes needed across the system.

This is a crucial moment to deepen our understanding of persistent disadvantage.

Section 1 Demographics

Persistently disadvantaged pupils are pupils who have spent at least 80% of their time in school eligible for free school meals. In England, 12.9% of pupils are persistently disadvantaged, making up half of all disadvantaged pupils.

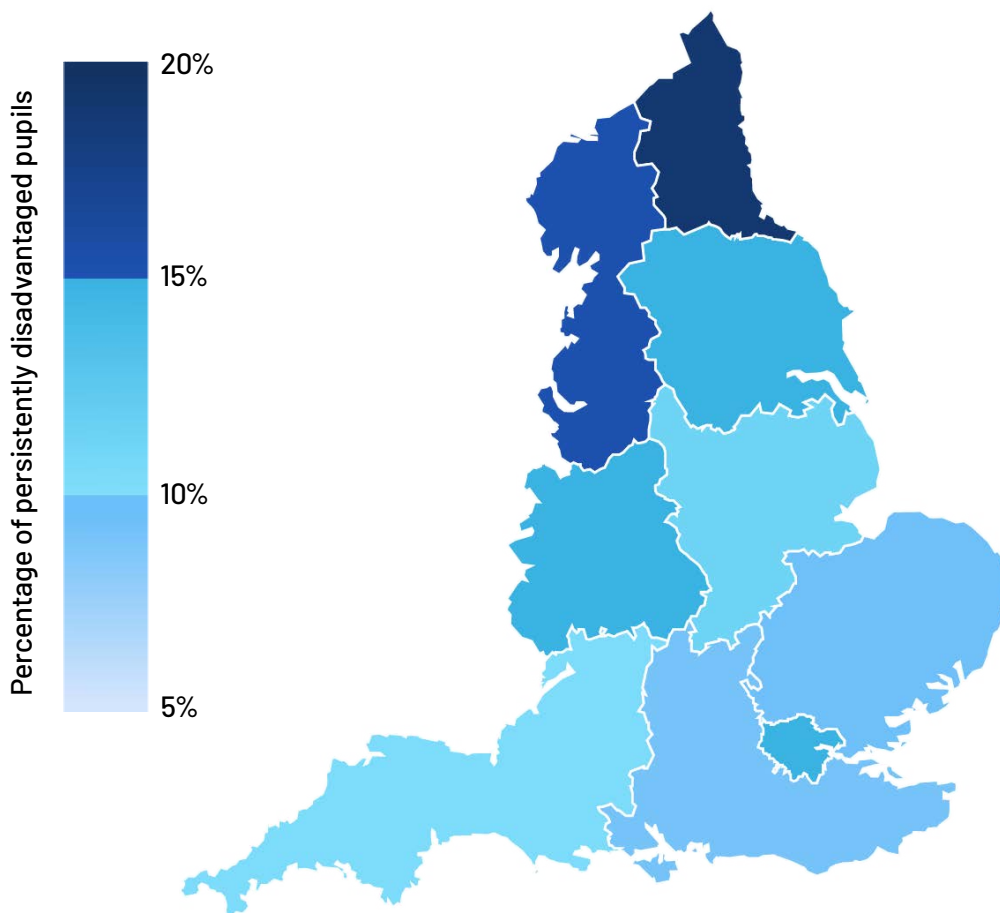
Persistent disadvantage by region

Out of the nine regions, the North East has the highest rate of persistent disadvantage, at 18.6%. The lowest persistent disadvantage rates are in the South East and the East of England, at 8.7% and 9.4% respectively.

12.9%

of pupils in England are persistently disadvantaged, making up half of all disadvantaged pupils.

Figure 1: Persistent disadvantage by region



Special Educational Needs (SEN)

We know that disadvantaged children are more likely to have SEN but less likely to secure an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). They're also less likely to get a special school place, and their families are less likely to be happy with the support their children are receiving [5].

The new data we commissioned shows that 30% of persistently disadvantaged pupils have an identified special educational need — over twice as many as non-disadvantaged pupils, and eight percentage points higher than shorter-term disadvantaged pupils.

Section 2 The attainment gap

Attainment gap at age 16

Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are the equivalent of 19.1 months of learning behind their peers by the time they sit their GCSEs.

When this data is broken down further, the scale of the challenge for persistently disadvantaged pupils becomes clear. While the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers narrowed between 2011 and 2019, this did not extend to persistently disadvantaged pupils. At present, pupils from persistently disadvantaged backgrounds are 22.4 months behind, whereas the gap for shorter-term disadvantaged pupils falls to 15.7 months – a stark finding that highlights the effects of living in long-term poverty.

Figure 2: Learning gap in months by disadvantage status

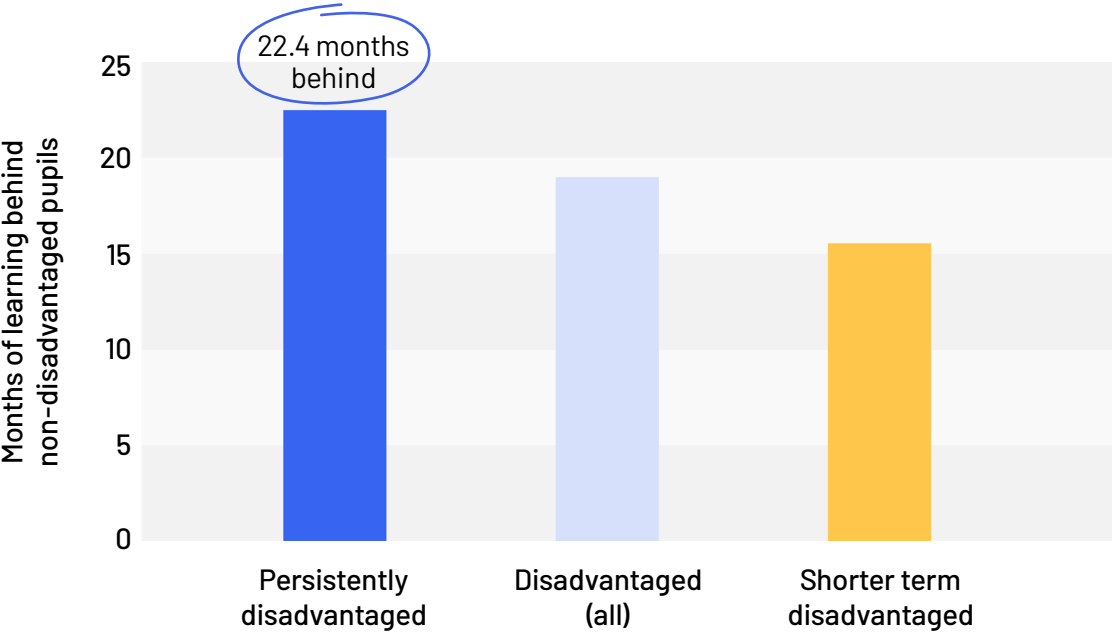


Table 1 outlines what this learning gap in months translates to in grades*. It shows that **across the country, for both persistently disadvantaged and shorter-term disadvantaged pupils, not passing English and maths GCSE is the norm.**

Table 1. Average grade in English and maths GCSE

	Persistently disadvantaged pupils	Shorter-term disadvantaged pupils	Non-disadvantaged pupils
Nationally	3.3	3.8	4.9

*Grade 4 is the minimum grade needed to avoid mandatory resits.

Attainment gap and SEN

The data also highlights the 'double disadvantage' faced by SEN pupils in terms of educational outcomes. The average English and maths GCSE grade for persistently disadvantaged pupils without SEN is 3.3. However, for persistently disadvantaged pupils with SEN support it is 2.5, and for persistently disadvantaged pupils with an EHCP it is just 1.1. This means that persistently disadvantaged pupils with EHCPs are four years behind their non-disadvantaged, non-SEN peers. Persistently disadvantaged pupils with EHCPs are also eight months behind non-disadvantaged pupils with EHCPs, showing the effect of disadvantage at every level of need.

These findings show that persistently disadvantaged pupils with SEN need targeted, earlier and more intensive support which recognises the compounding factors of 'double disadvantage'.

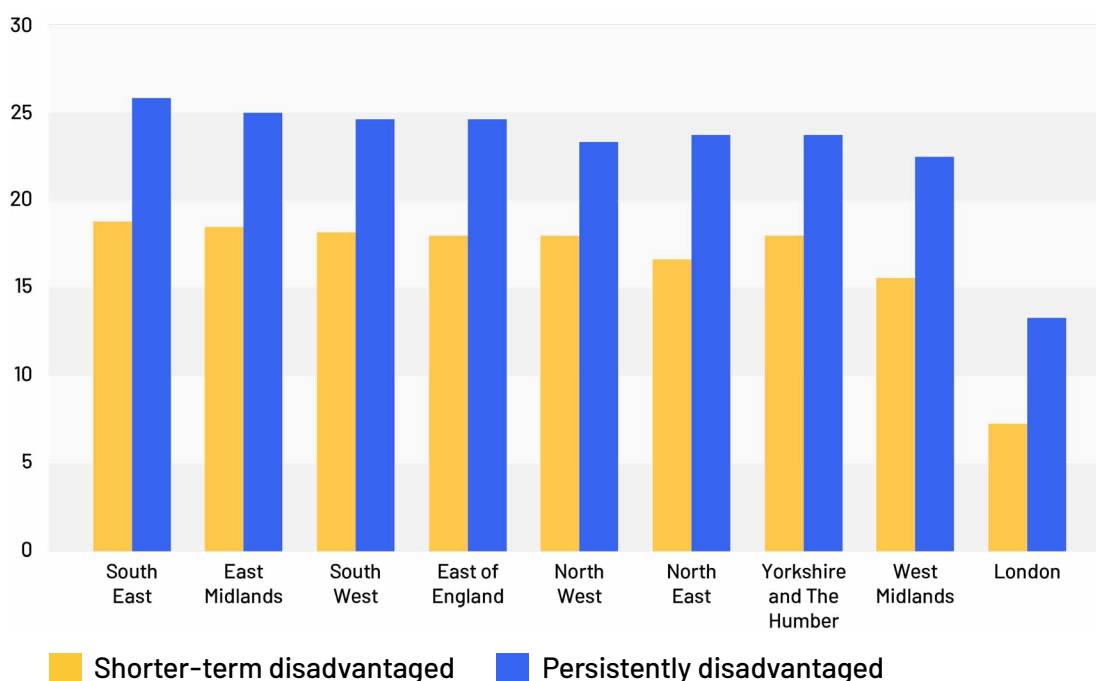
Attainment gap by region

Attainment among persistently disadvantaged pupils varies across England. While these pupils face barriers everywhere, the size of the attainment gap and the outcomes they achieve differ between local authorities.

Examining these regional variations helps to highlight where persistently disadvantaged pupils are most at risk of falling behind, as well as where stronger outcomes are being achieved. Understanding these patterns is critical for identifying where additional support may be needed and where lessons can be learned from areas achieving better outcomes for this group.

London has by far the smallest attainment gap for both shorter-term disadvantaged and persistently disadvantaged pupils, as Figure 3 shows. Comparably, the South East has the highest attainment gaps, with persistently disadvantaged pupils 25.9 months behind their wealthier peers. This means that persistently disadvantaged pupils in the South East are, on average, entering their GCSEs in Year 11 with the level of learning that their non-disadvantaged peers had achieved in Year 9.

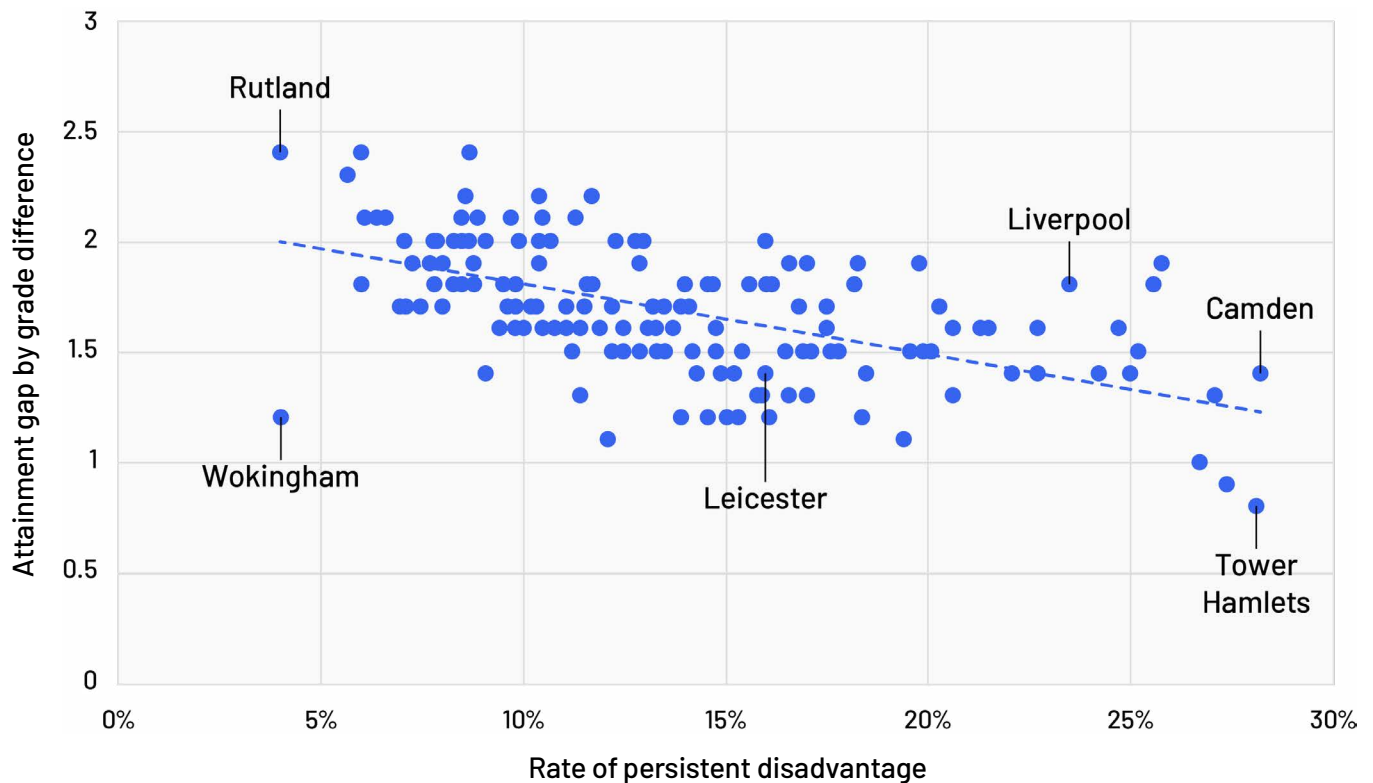
Figure 3: Attainment gap at Key Stage 4 by region and disadvantage status



Attainment gap by local authority

Figure 4 highlights the local authorities where outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils are strongest and weakest. Examining these differences helps to reveal how local context may shape the attainment gap. Our analysis finds that, on average, the attainment gap between persistently disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers is smaller in local authorities where persistently disadvantaged pupils make up a larger share of the pupil population – as Figure 4 illustrates.

Figure 4: Attainment gap by grade difference



The top ten highest performing local authorities for persistently disadvantaged pupils are all in London. These local authorities are:

Table 2: Highest performing local authorities by average grade in English and maths GCSE and pupil disadvantage status (London)

Local authority	Average grade in English and maths GCSE		
	Persistently disadvantaged pupils	Shorter-term disadvantaged pupils	Non-disadvantaged pupils
Westminster	4.6	4.8	5.5
Tower Hamlets	4.5	4.7	5.3
Kensington and Chelsea	4.5	4.6	5.5
Hammersmith and Fulham	4.4	4.7	5.5
Redbridge	4.3	4.8	5.6
Ealing	4.3	4.6	5.5
Hackney	4.2	4.8	5.5
Barnet	4.2	4.5	5.8
Kingston upon Thames	4.2	4.1	5.9
Newham	4.1	4.8	5.3

Interestingly, although non-disadvantaged pupils perform better than the national average in these local authorities, the gaps between groups tends to be smaller also, as shown by some of the examples highlighted in Figure 4.

The top ten highest performing local authorities outside of London are:

Table 3: Highest performing local authorities by average grade in English and maths GCSE and pupil disadvantage status (outside London)

Local authority	Average grade in English and maths GCSE		
	Persistently disadvantaged pupils	Shorter-term disadvantaged	Non-disadvantaged
Birmingham	3.6	4.2	5.0
Luton	3.6	4.1	4.7
Bolton	3.6	3.9	4.8
Slough	3.5	4.3	5.1
Stockport	3.5	4.0	5.1
Kirklees	3.5	4.0	5.0
Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole	3.5	3.9	5.2
Calderdale	3.5	3.8	5.0
Coventry	3.5	3.8	4.8
Doncaster	3.4	3.8	4.9

This means that in the top performing local authorities outside of London for persistently disadvantaged pupils, the average grade is still below the standard pass grade of 4. For shorter-term disadvantaged pupils, half of the local authorities have an average grade of below 4.

The lowest performing local authorities are:

Table 4: Lowest performing local authorities by average grade in English and maths GCSE and pupil disadvantage status

Local authority	Average grade in English and maths GCSE		
	Persistently disadvantaged pupils	Shorter-term disadvantaged	Non-disadvantaged
Herefordshire, County of	2.7	3.3	4.6
Cheshire West and Chester	2.7	3.5	4.9
Reading	2.7	3.8	4.89
Blackpool	2.7	3.3	4.3
Knowsley	2.8	3.2	4.4
Central Bedfordshire	2.8	3.3	4.7
Essex	2.8	3.4	4.8
Telford and Wrekin	2.8	3.5	4.5
Torbay	2.8	3.5	4.6
North Somerset	2.8	3.5	4.8
Medway	2.8	3.6	4.7

Learning in poverty

In deprived communities like Blackpool, persistently disadvantaged pupils face huge barriers to learning. From lacking basic necessities to struggling with confidence and wellbeing, these challenges can make achieving at school feel almost impossible. Schools are becoming critical support services for these pupils and their families.

This case study shares the stark reality for pupils living and learning in one of the country's poorest areas.



By John Connolly
Acting Headteacher, Unity Academy Blackpool

The first thing you notice working in schools in Blackpool is how visible the poverty is. It's there in the children arriving at school with unwashed clothes, in the pupils coming through the gates hungry, in the families who can't afford even the most basic school uniform. At the schools where I've worked, we keep the uniform as simple and cheap as possible, but even then many families still need us to provide it for free. We run a pupil food bank inside the school, and we fund free breakfasts for both primary and secondary pupils. Around one in six secondary pupils relies on that breakfast provision each morning.

The effects of poverty stretch far beyond the classroom. Housing in Blackpool is often poor quality, with low council housing stock and a heavy reliance on private rentals. Many of our pupils live in overcrowded accommodation. Some don't even have a table where they can sit and complete homework, and some don't have a proper bed to sleep in. When children are living in those conditions, it becomes much harder for them to experience the kind of childhood many people would see as normal.

By the time some children start Reception, the impact is already clear. A number are still in nappies, and many arrive with significant speech and language difficulties. Those early disadvantages shape so much of what follows.

Schools try hard to fill the gaps, but even opportunities many schools take for granted can be difficult to provide here. Trips, clubs, and cultural experiences often have to be fully funded by the school because families simply cannot contribute. Every opportunity comes with an added cost that schools in more affluent areas may not have to consider.

What stands out most about many of our pupils is not bad behaviour, but vulnerability. Many crave attention because they struggle with resilience and emotional regulation. Being told they've done something wrong can feel overwhelming for them. That's why we've worked hard to become a trauma-informed school, building systems that prioritise consistency, safety, and trust.



Pupils live in overcrowded accommodation. Some don't even have a table where they can sit and complete homework, and some don't have a proper bed to sleep in.

At the same time, we have high expectations. Clear routines, rewards, and consequences matter because they provide boundaries and stability that many pupils don't get elsewhere. Staff buy into that culture completely, and the consistency helps children feel secure. Once that foundation is in place, the challenge becomes helping pupils cope with discomfort and develop resilience. During exams, for example, we have staff waiting outside halls to support pupils who panic or become overwhelmed. For many students, managing that anxiety is as much a challenge as the exam itself.

Attendance is another constant struggle. Some parents keep children at home for minor illnesses because they are not working and it feels easier to do so. But we also see genuine health problems linked to poverty. Poor diet, damp housing, overcrowding, and stress all affect children's health. In families where parents are going out to work, older children are often carers for their younger siblings, so we see siblings off school at the same time.

There is also a deep-rooted sense of limited opportunity in parts of Blackpool. Too many young people grow up believing that benefits are the only realistic future available to them. Schools work hard to raise aspirations, but that mindset can be difficult to break when pupils rarely see examples of different possibilities around them.

The community itself is constantly changing. Almost every week we admit new pupils while others leave. We regularly receive pupils midway through Year 10 or Year 11, after they have already already missed large sections of their education. This instability is strongly linked to poverty, as families have to move where accommodation is cheapest.

Many of our deprived pupils with SEND also struggle with social, emotional and mental health difficulties, which makes learning incredibly difficult. Yet those overlapping needs are not reflected properly in funding systems. So acknowledging persistent disadvantage and the multi-layers of disadvantage would be really useful.

Another barrier for our disadvantaged pupils is confidence. Pupils from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to believe they belong in those higher pathways. Many of our students struggle to see themselves that way, even when their academic achievement is strong. That's why we work so hard to build resilience and self-belief.

Schools working in places with entrenched poverty are doing far more than delivering lessons. They are providing food, stability, safety, emotional support, opportunity and belief. They are overcoming barriers simply not seen in other parts of the country. The progress made in those circumstances deserves to be recognised for what it truly is.



Too many young people grow up believing that benefits are the only realistic future available to them.



Schools working in places with entrenched poverty are doing far more than delivering lessons.

[Read the full story](#)

Section 3 Outlier schools

Beyond demographic averages, we wanted to look at the attainment gaps within schools so we could create a fuller picture of the attainment of persistently disadvantaged pupils across the country. Recent publicly available data tells us the overall attainment of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), but not the breakdown for pupils who are persistently disadvantaged.

Looking at this data allows us to see which schools (1) are achieving above average grades for persistently disadvantaged pupils, and (2) are seeing persistently disadvantaged pupils outperforming the national average for non-disadvantaged pupils. As one of our goals at Teach First is to eliminate the attainment gap, we can learn a lot from schools that are already doing this.

Figure 5: Persistent disadvantage gap at Key Stage 4 in months

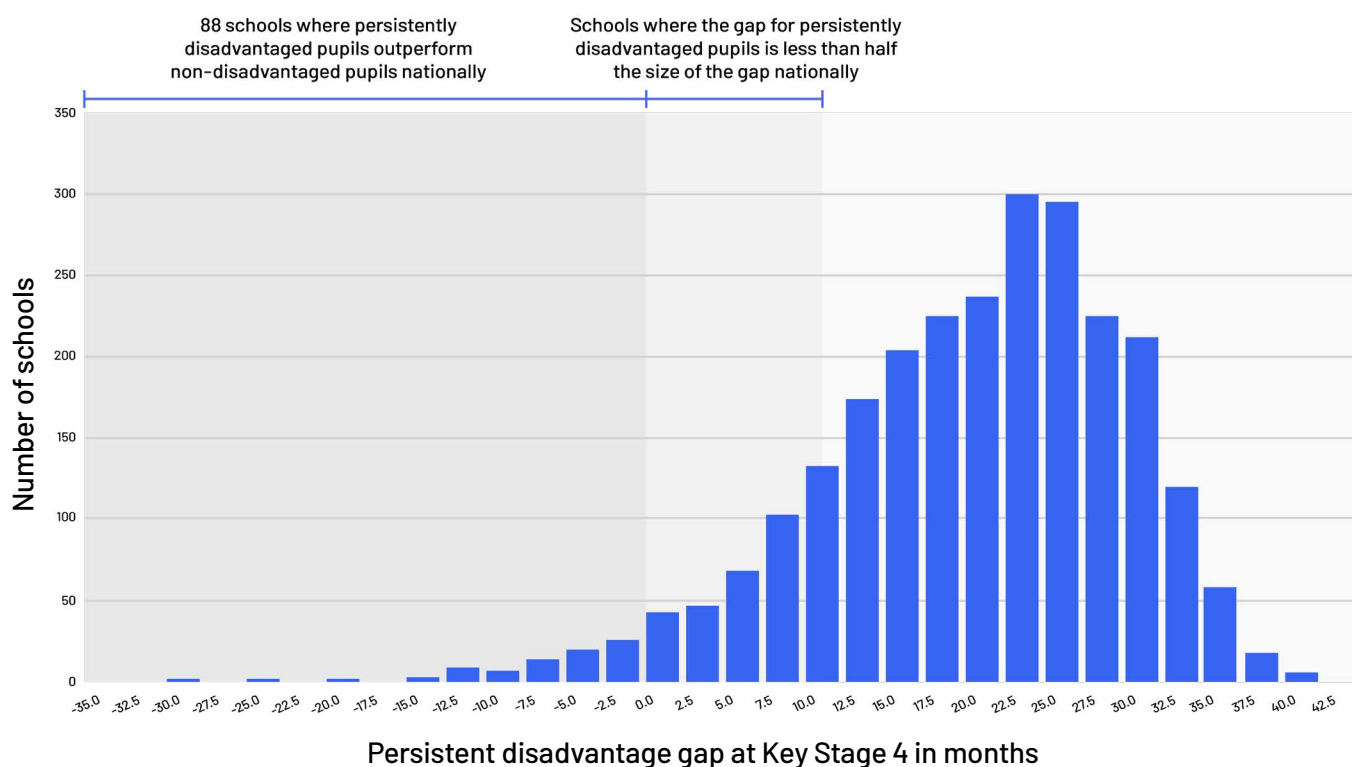


Figure 5 shows that in 2024, of the 2,554 state-funded mainstream secondary schools* for which EPI could calculate an attainment gap for persistently disadvantaged pupils measure:

There were

399 schools

where the attainment gap was less than half the national average

There were schools in

every region

that had an attainment gap of less than half the national average

6%

of schools in the North East

13%

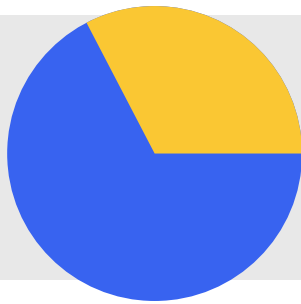
of schools in Yorkshire and Humber

*There were 3,274 schools in the dataset, but the rest of the schools did not have a high enough number of persistently disadvantaged pupils for their outcomes to be public.

There were

88 schools

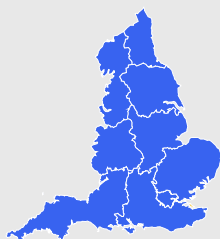
where persistently disadvantaged pupils outperformed non-disadvantaged pupils nationally



London accounts for

nearly 2/3

of schools where the attainment gap has closed entirely



In 418 schools the attainment gap was at least

2.5 years

2% of schools in London

28% of schools in the South East

The 88 schools where persistently disadvantaged pupils excel

Of the 2,554 state-funded mainstream secondary schools included in the analysis, 88 had an average attainment for persistently disadvantaged pupils which was higher than the national average for non-disadvantaged pupils (4.9 in English and maths GCSE in 2024). These schools (many of which are longstanding Teach First partner schools) represent a small but important subset of the system, demonstrating that high attainment for pupils facing sustained poverty is possible.

Of these 88 schools:

- **56 are located in London**
- **8 are academically selective grammar schools**
- **33 are faith schools**
- **32 are single sex schools**

Several of these characteristics overlap. Faith, selective and single sex schools are overrepresented relative to their share of the national secondary school population, and this must be considered carefully when interpreting the findings.

Geographical concentration and local outliers

The concentration of schools in London reflects the capital's comparatively stronger outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils overall. There are just 11 schools outside London which are neither faith schools nor grammar schools. These schools are located in:

- Bournemouth, Cambridgeshire, Derby, Gateshead, Gloucestershire, Hertfordshire, Hull, Sheffield, Stockton-on-Tees and Tameside.



These schools are local outliers, in that they are not within the local authorities which overall perform the best for persistently disadvantaged pupils outside London. This suggests that school-level practice, leadership and context may play an important role, even in areas where outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils are generally weaker.

Among these 11 schools, the average persistent disadvantage rate was 9.2%, with an average FSM rate of 21.3%. The highest persistent disadvantage and FSM rates within this group were 21.3% and 34.9% respectively.

Levels of disadvantage within the 88 schools

Across the 88 schools, the average rate of persistent disadvantage was 13.9%, which is slightly lower than the average of 15.1% for the schools in the dataset*. The average FSM rate was 29.6%, which is slightly higher than the average of 26.6% for the schools in the dataset. There is significant variation in this group:

- Persistent disadvantage ranges from 4.3% to 50% of pupils
- FSM eligibility ranges from 9% to 65.1% with several schools serving intakes where more than half are eligible

This variation indicates that strong outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils are not confined to schools with very low overall disadvantage.

Faith schools

Faith schools make up a disproportionate percentage of the 88 schools—37%, compared with 18% of secondary schools nationally. [6] In 2024, the Sutton Trust published research which showed that faith schools tend to admit fewer FSM pupils than the average in their local authority. [7] The persistent disadvantage data suggests a similar pattern.

In only five of the 33 faith schools was the proportion of persistently disadvantaged pupils equal to or higher than the local authority average. This highlights the role that admissions practices may play in shaping school level outcomes, and is particularly relevant to recent policy discussions around the 50% rule for new faith schools. [8]

This does not diminish the success of these schools for the persistently disadvantaged pupils they serve. However, it suggests that access to high performing schools is uneven, and that disadvantaged pupils are not always well represented in schools with the strongest outcomes. Targeted admissions or prioritisation mechanisms for persistently disadvantaged pupils could help widen access to schools that demonstrably support strong outcomes for this group.

Single-sex schools

Single-sex schools account for a disproportionate proportion of the 88 schools, at 36%, compared to around 11% of state-funded schools nationally. [9] Of these 32 schools:

- 11 were non-faith schools
- 7 non-faith and non-selective—of these, all but one were in London, where single-sex schools are more common.

Recent analysis by the FFT found that when controlling for various pupil characteristics, girls saw modest grade benefits from attending single-sex schools, but there did not appear to be a difference for boys. [9] Based on these findings, since the 88 schools contain both boys' and girls' schools, the overrepresentation of single-sex schools is unlikely to be explained solely by the single-sex model itself. It may instead reflect other associated factors such as leadership, culture or admissions patterns.

*15.1% is the average persistent disadvantage rate across the 2,554 state-funded mainstream secondary schools in our dataset; this is slightly higher than the average persistent disadvantage rate for pupils discussed elsewhere in the report, which is 12.9%.

What these schools show and what they do not

The 88 schools demonstrate that poor outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils are not inevitable. Even pupils who experience poverty across most of their school lives can achieve highly, including at levels above the national average for non-disadvantaged pupils.

The significance of this group lies not in offering a single solution, but in showing that system level averages conceal important variation, and that there are schools – including non selective schools outside high performing local authorities – that are achieving exceptional outcomes for pupils facing long term disadvantage.

Understanding how these schools support persistently disadvantaged pupils and how access to such environments can be widened is a critical next step.

Summary

Variation of attainment between schools demonstrates what is possible when persistently disadvantaged pupils receive the help they need to succeed. With the right resources and support, school leaders and classroom teachers have the power to change lives and break the cycle of poverty, and this data demonstrates that.

However, these outcomes are far from universal. There are still hundreds of schools where the attainment gap between persistently disadvantaged pupils and non-disadvantaged pupils is more than 30 months.

We must end the postcode lottery that means that the quality of education is dependent on location and ensure that children facing persistent disadvantage get the support they need to thrive at school, regardless of where they live in the country.

In the following section, we look at a number of Teach First partner schools exploring what is needed to ensure these pupils can thrive. All schools have high percentages of persistently disadvantaged pupils, yet are still among the 88 schools where persistently disadvantaged pupils outperform the national average for non-disadvantaged pupils. This success is testament to the exceptional leaders of their schools, the dedicated classroom teachers and all other brilliant staff members.

Success spotlight

Mercia School, Sheffield

With high child poverty and large disadvantage gaps, Sheffield's attainment for persistently disadvantaged pupils is even lower than average. Over a third of persistently disadvantaged pupils in Sheffield do not go onto further education or training post-16.

The rate of persistent disadvantage at Mercia School is 17%. And the rate of free school meals eligibility is 25.4%.



Mercia is known for its strong culture, which prioritises high expectations in terms of both academia and behaviour. At the same time, we are genuinely inclusive, meaning that no child gets left behind, regardless of their circumstances. We are immensely proud of our pupils, our staff and our community. In 2025 we were in the top 2% for attainment, rubbing shoulders with the nation's most famous private schools and selective grammars.

Joshua Fisher, Headteacher

[Read the full story](#)



Average grade in English and maths GCSE for persistently disadvantaged pupils

4.5

Sheffield

5.58

Mercia School

Mulberry School for Girls, Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets is home to many global financial institutions while also facing stark socio-economic inequality. It is also a highly diverse community: 70% of pupils speak English as an additional language. Tower Hamlets is one of the highest achieving local authorities for persistently disadvantaged pupils in the country, with strong destinations outcomes.

The rate of persistent disadvantage at Mulberry School for Girls is 31.4%. And the rate of free school meals eligibility is 48.1%.



At Mulberry, achievement is a shared endeavour. It is shaped by the ambition and resilience of our families, the dedication of our staff, and the determination of our students. Together, we ensure that no barrier defines our learners - every student is supported to thrive and succeed at the highest level.

Fatima El-meeyuf, Principal

[Read the full story](#)



Average grade in English and maths GCSE for persistently disadvantaged pupils

4.5

Tower Hamlets

5.27

Mulberry School for Girls

Landau Forte College, Derby

Derby is a smaller East Midlands city with some of the highest child poverty rates in the country. It also has the second-worst post-16 destinations in the country despite being home to some large employers. At Landau Forte, 18% of pupils speak English as an additional language, slightly below the national average.

The rate of persistent disadvantage at Landau Forte is 8.2% and the rate of free school meals eligibility is 28.7%.



At Landau Forte, we are committed to breaking down barriers so that every pupil can learn, grow, and thrive. We are proud that those facing the toughest circumstances are able to achieve just as highly as their peers, thanks to the collective effort of our whole school community.

Alison Brannick, Principal

[Read the full story](#)



Average grade in English and maths GCSE for persistently disadvantaged pupils

2.9

Derby

5.13

Landau Forte College

Oasis Academy South Bank, Lambeth

Lambeth is an inner-London community facing high poverty, soaring housing costs and frequent population movement. The school community is diverse, with over half of pupils speaking English as an additional language. Destinations outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils in Lambeth are slightly better than national average.

The rate of persistent disadvantage at Oasis Academy South Bank is 25%. And the rate of free school meals eligibility is 65.2%.



At Oasis South Bank, we believe in every student's unique potential, no matter their starting point, background or challenge. We work relentlessly to remove barriers and create the conditions for every young person to thrive. We set the bar high, because our pupils deserve the very best, and we are incredibly proud to see them consistently rise to, and exceed, these expectations.

Anna Richardson, Principal

[Read the full story](#)



Average grade in English and maths GCSE for persistently disadvantaged pupils

3.8

Lambeth

5.52

Oasis Academy South Bank

Section 4 Destinations

Persistently disadvantaged pupils are far less likely to be pursuing substantial further study or training after they finish Key Stage 4 aged 16. The percentage of pupils not studying towards a significant qualification (equivalent to at least one GCSE) or an apprenticeship after Year 11 is as follows:

- Non-disadvantaged: 9.3%
- Shorter-term disadvantaged: 18.9%
- Persistently disadvantaged: 25.5%

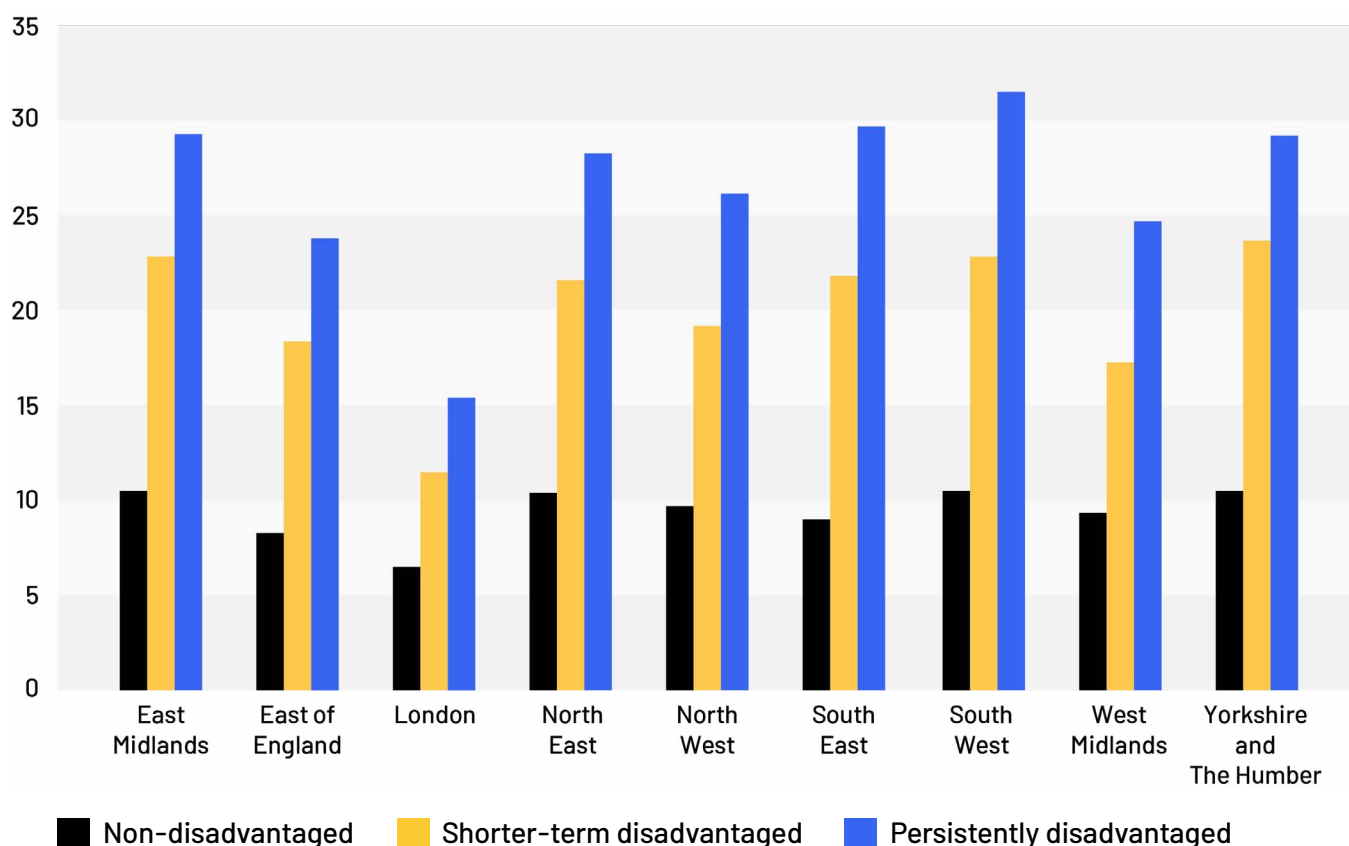
This means that more than one in four persistently disadvantaged pupils are not going onto sixth form, further education or apprenticeships after finishing their GCSEs.

Destinations by region

Among the 2022 Key Stage 4 cohort, nearly a third of persistently disadvantaged pupils in the South West did not progress onto further study or training in the 12 months after leaving school. High non-progression rates were also seen in the South East, East Midlands, and Yorkshire and the Humber. By contrast, London had the lowest rate, with 15.4% of persistently disadvantaged pupils not progressing to a sustained post-16 pathway.

At the local authority level, London authorities dominate the group with the lowest non-participation rates: Brent, Haringey, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets, Camden, and Barnet all had rates below 12%. In contrast, Reading, Blackpool, North Somerset, and Derby had rates exceeding 40%, illustrating stark geographic disparities in the post-16 destinations of persistently disadvantaged pupils.

Figure 6: Percentage of pupils with no sustained post-16 pathway by disadvantage status



Top performing local authorities in London

As with attainment, we can see that all the top performing local authorities for post-16 destinations are within boroughs across London.

Table 5: Best performing local authorities by % not in a post-16 destination and pupil disadvantage status

Local authority	Persistently disadvantaged	Shorter-term disadvantaged	Non-disadvantaged
Camden	10.3%	8.3%	6.0%
Tower Hamlets	11.1%	7.9%	5.2%
Haringey	11.3%	10.6%	9.1%
Redbridge	11.8%	7.5%	4.9%
Barnet	11.8%	11.4%	6.9%
Brent	11.9%	11.0%	5.4%
Harrow	12.1%	6.3%	4.4%
Ealing	12.4%	11.7%	5.8%
Hackney	12.9%	9.6%	5.8%
Barking and Dagenham	13.0%	9.9%	6.3%

Top outside London

Table 6: Best performing local authorities by % not in a post-16 destination and pupil disadvantage status (outside London)

Local authority	Persistently disadvantaged	Shorter-term disadvantaged	Non-disadvantaged
Luton	13.6%	11.0%	7.5%
Bury	14.7%	13.4%	9.3%
Slough	15.6%	13.0%	7.4%
Southend-on-Sea	17.1%	14.8%	5.9%
Halton	17.4%	11.2%	5.8%
Blackburn with Darwen	17.6%	20.4%	10.5%
Thurrock	17.6%	16.2%	7.6%
Hertfordshire	18.7%	15.6%	6.0%
Brighton and Hove	19.3%	14.7%	6.4%
Peterborough	20.0%	17.5%	9.0%

Even in some of the highest performing local authorities outside of London, persistently disadvantaged pupils are significantly less likely to progress to a sustained destination in the 12 months following Year 11.

Lowest performing local authorities

Table 7: Lowest performing local authorities by % not in a post-16 destination and pupil disadvantage status

Local authority	Persistently disadvantaged	Shorter-term disadvantaged	Non-disadvantaged
North Somerset	51.3%	44.3%	16.3%
Derby	45.6%	39.1%	17.7%
Blackpool	41.7%	31.6%	15.0%
Barnsley	41.5%	33.5%	14.9%
Reading	40.7%	32.5%	13.0%
Somerset	39.0%	31.7%	12.0%
South Gloucestershire	35.9%	26.2%	10.2%
Windsor and Maidenhead	35.6%	18.3%	7.5%
Bath and North East Somerset	35.4%	23.6%	8.9%
Warwickshire	35.3%	23.0%	9.4%

Such high rates represent a profound loss of opportunity, locking disadvantage in place at the very moment when education should be opening pathways to further study. In North Somerset, more than one in two persistently disadvantaged pupils leave Year 11 without progressing into further education or training, while rates in Derby are almost as high.

The highest performing local authorities show that outcomes at this scale are not inevitable. However, the consistent gap in destination outcomes between persistently disadvantaged pupils and their wealthier peers across every local authority makes clear that this is not simply a question of whether opportunities exist, but of who is able to access them. Persistent disadvantage continues to shape young people's chances long after schooling ends.

Bucking the destinations trend

The data on post-16 destinations is stark, particularly for persistently disadvantaged pupils. But by focusing on the issues, and implementing innovative solutions, some schools are proving that poor outcomes are not inevitable, even in the most challenging contexts. This case study explains how Derby Moor Spencer Academy achieves this through embedding careers at every stage of the curriculum and building strong relationships with local employers.

Derby is the second lowest performing local authority in the country for destinations outcomes for disadvantaged and persistently disadvantaged pupils, and is the lowest performing for non-disadvantaged pupils.

About Derby Moor Spencer Academy

Location:

Littleover, on the outskirts of Derby



Pupils:

1,706



Persistently disadvantaged rate:

School

12.8%

Derby

12.6%

Sustained destination post-16 rate:

School

89%

Local average

58%

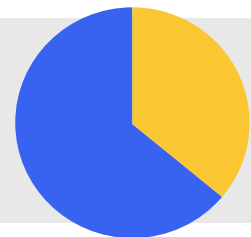
School:

Coeducational school and sixth form



Free school meals eligibility:

36.5%



By Scott Doyle
Principal, Derby Moor Spencer Academy

Disadvantage affects young people in Derby not just in terms of material poverty, but in the lack of life and career opportunities available to them. Many of our students face barriers that their more affluent peers do not: lower household incomes, fewer professional networks, less access to work experience through family contacts, and fewer opportunities to build confidence and cultural capital outside school. We saw that, although there were large employers in the area, they were not hiring local people, and so our young people from less advantaged backgrounds were not benefitting from their presence in the city.

We reached out to employers to find out why and learned that employers were not hiring local people due to a skills gap. We asked what skills they were looking for and co-designed training, projects and curriculum content around those skills. We work with local businesses to ensure that our pupils are

developing the skills that employers are asking for. We have strong links with employers across Derby, including Microsoft, DHL, Rolls Royce, Alstom, and Cooper Parry. Many of these relationships began with our business breakfasts which we hold on inset days, facilitating networking between staff and businesses. These have helped ensure that local businesses understand both the strengths and the challenges within our community.



We work with local businesses to ensure that our pupils are developing the skills that employers are asking for.

Students participate in employability projects, which have been co-designed and are assessed by local employers. While their peers from more affluent families have a range of experiences to draw upon, such as volunteering trips abroad and work experience with parental contacts, the students at our school are less likely to have those opportunities. Our employability projects help level the playing field by giving students meaningful experiences, practical examples, and employer feedback that they can confidently discuss in interviews.

We place a strong emphasis on interview preparation because we know that confidence, vocabulary and professional communication are often shaped by background and exposure. We have regular interview experience, with annual mock interviews from Year 9 onwards. We also interview for roles within the school so it becomes normal. For example, Year 7s interview to be transition mentors, Key Stage 4 students interview to be form reps and sixth formers interview to be school leaders. We make sure they do interviews both face-to-face and virtually, so they are prepared for both scenarios.

We noticed many of our pupils, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, struggled with oracy, and so we have also built oracy into the curriculum from Year 7 onwards, which helps to build vocabulary, confidence and self-belief.

Employability is woven into the behaviour system. We make it clear to pupils that expectations such as being on time, having the right equipment, and having the right uniform are all important because it will be necessary for the world of work. For many disadvantaged pupils, school may be the primary place where these workplace habits and expectations are consistently modelled and reinforced.

Our approach in sixth form is also important. We offer a mixture of vocational and academic subjects, which encourages more students to stay at the school. Sixth formers wear business wear and instead of 'free periods' have 'independent study periods', which they spend within the school, visible to pupils in lower school. This creates aspirational role models for younger students, many of whom may not otherwise see people from backgrounds similar to their own progressing into higher education or professional careers. We also teach how to effectively study independently, recognising that disadvantaged pupils may not always have access to quiet study spaces, academic support, or guidance at home.

We are incredibly fortunate that we have a talented careers leader, who was previously a senior leader in the school. His entire role, albeit part-time, is the leadership of careers and employability. This means he is able to pick up the phone when contacts call, and has enough time to do all the necessary networking, planning and management that is required to have a careers offer like ours.

In terms of what could be done to support, of course there is always funding. There are a lot of requirements placed on schools in terms of careers, and recently there have been more, but there isn't the additional support to go along with it. So, ring-fenced funding for careers would help, because not all schools in our position are as lucky as we are to have someone who is willing and able to dedicate so much time to their careers programme.

It is important to create opportunities to recognise schools like ours and the work that they do, in the contexts that they're in. It's a case of recognising the progress that is made, the amount of hard work that it takes and the difference it has on the life chances of the young people we serve.

We still have a long way to go, but we are proud of the progress we have made in ensuring that disadvantage does not define our pupils' aspirations or limit their futures.

Policy recommendations

The data in this position paper paints a clear picture: over a million pupils are being locked out of realising their potential.

At the same time, it shows that change is possible – some schools and local authorities are bucking the trend, demonstrating that the hurdles presented by persistent disadvantage can be overcome. Yet the data also highlights stark regional inequalities, exposing the reality of our education system as a postcode lottery.

What the data cannot tell us is why these gaps occur or, crucially, what works to close them. While this report identifies the scale and distribution of the challenge, the data alone cannot fully explain why these gaps emerge or which interventions are most effective at school/trust level.

Our recommendations therefore focus on three priorities: taking immediate action to make persistent disadvantage visible within the system, targeting reform towards the schools and places facing the greatest challenges, and building a system that responds more effectively to long-term disadvantage over time.

Immediate actions Government can take now

Persistent disadvantage is currently largely invisible within national accountability, improvement and reform programmes. Without visibility, there can be no sustained action to close the gap. Government should therefore take immediate steps to ensure persistently disadvantaged pupils are recognised explicitly across the education system.

Make persistent disadvantage visible

The Department for Education should:

- Introduce a formal, published definition of persistent disadvantage, based on pupils being eligible for free school meals in at least 80% of school years recorded in the National Pupil Database.
- Publish attainment, attendance and post-16 destination outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils in annual statistical releases, beginning with Key Stage 4 attainment and post-16 destinations data.
- Ensure persistently disadvantaged pupils are visible within national accountability and improvement frameworks, enabling schools and local areas to identify and respond to this group more effectively.

Target support towards schools with the largest persistent disadvantage gaps

Large attainment gaps for persistently disadvantaged pupils exist across all parts of the country, including in otherwise affluent areas. Government should therefore identify and support schools where persistently disadvantaged pupils experience the weakest outcomes.

This should include:

- Identifying schools with the largest persistent disadvantage attainment gaps through national data and accountability measures, and ensuring improvement programmes like the RISE advisors focus explicitly on outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils.
- Offering targeted school improvement support through RISE teams, working collaboratively with trusts, local authorities and school leaders to diagnose barriers and share effective practice.
- Considering how upcoming reforms to school admissions can prevent persistently disadvantaged pupils from being locked out of the best performing local schools, including through pilots that improve access for pupils experiencing sustained disadvantage.

Targeted reforms for the schools and places most affected

The evidence shows that outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils vary sharply between schools, trusts and regions. These inequalities are not inevitable, but they do require targeted intervention focused on the schools and communities facing the greatest barriers.

Attract and retain strong leaders and teachers in schools serving persistently disadvantaged communities

Closing the persistent disadvantage gap will require sustained investment in the people leading and teaching in schools serving disadvantaged communities. Teaching quality and strong leadership are amongst the most important in-school factors influencing pupil outcomes and is essential to long-term school improvement. Yet schools serving the highest concentrations of persistently disadvantaged pupils often face the greatest recruitment and retention challenges.

Government should therefore:

- Introduce targeted financial incentives to encourage teachers and leaders to work in schools with high levels of persistent disadvantage.
- Prioritise schools with high levels of persistent disadvantage within the headteacher retention pilot, particularly where outcomes are weakest, attracting strong leaders into these schools.
- Strengthen governance capacity through high-quality training and guidance for governors and trustees, improved use of persistent disadvantage data in strategic decision-making and school improvement planning, and governance frameworks that better reflect the responsibilities of boards serving communities with high levels of persistent disadvantage.

Develop leaders equipped for complex school contexts

Leadership development programmes should better reflect the realities of leading schools serving persistently disadvantaged communities. Evidence from Teach First's leadership development programmes highlights the importance of long term, context-specific development, involving coaching, peer networks and a whole-school improvement approach. We believe these principles should be:

- Embedded within teacher CPD and leadership development, including more opportunities for peer learning and collaboration between schools serving similar communities to secure a pipeline of future leaders prepared for the most challenging contexts.

Address regional inequalities through Missions North East and Coastal

The scale of regional variation in outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils demonstrates the need for targeted place-based reform. We welcome the Government's ambitions through Missions North East and Coastal to extend the lessons of the London Challenge to areas facing entrenched educational inequalities.

To maximise impact, these initiatives should:

- Prioritise schools and communities with the largest attainment gaps for persistently disadvantaged pupils.
- Include clear measures focused specifically on narrowing attainment and post-16 destination gaps for persistently disadvantaged pupils.
- Evaluate success based on improvements in outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils over time.

Building a system that supports persistently disadvantaged pupils

Ensure disadvantage funding reforms support persistent disadvantage

The support provided to persistently disadvantaged pupils needs to match the scale of attainment gap. Additional funding can be specifically targeted to these pupils on top of the current funding, covered by a reinvestment of the money saved from falling pupil rolls. We propose a persistent disadvantage premium relative to the attainment gap at primary and secondary. We estimate this would require around:

- £155 additional per primary-aged pupil
- £190 additional per secondary-aged pupil*

Using consistent pupil estimates (~1.07 million pupils), this represents an additional investment of around £180m, delivered through the current pupil premium to ensure targeted support at pupil level.

If the Government were to raise pupil premium in-line with the real-terms value of 2014/15, it would mean raising the base pupil premium to £1,848 for primary-aged pupils, and £1,329 for secondary-aged pupils, costing a total £556 million per year.

The persistent disadvantage top-up funding would be:

- £185 additional per primary-aged pupil
- £230 additional per secondary-aged pupil.

This would mean a total of £775 million additional investment each year.

The premium would begin in primary, in Reception all pupils eligible for pupil premium would also be eligible for the persistent disadvantage top-up. We support this additional funding because (1) it is the best way that we currently have to target primary-aged children in deep poverty, and (2) data shows how crucial these first years of school are for eliminating the attainment gap in later years.

The Schools White Paper published earlier this year outlined plans to readjust disadvantage funding to align with income as opposed to FSM eligibility. However, we advocate for using persistent disadvantage as it is currently measured (tied to FSM) until the income model has been proven to be a more robust and complete measure of depth and persistence of poverty. Due to the urgency of the challenge, it is critical that the Government does not wait to implement support.

Prioritise persistently disadvantaged young people in NEET prevention reforms

Persistently disadvantaged young people are at the greatest risk of becoming NEET at 16 but are not currently prioritised in current reforms. The Government should ensure that the post-16 reforms explicitly target persistently disadvantaged pupils by:

- Embedding persistently disadvantaged pupils within the 'Risk of NEET' indicator tools and guidance.
- Requiring schools and local areas to prioritise groups in transition planning and support.
- Measuring success in terms of reductions in NEET rates and improved post 16 destinations for persistently disadvantaged pupils.

* For primary aged pupils, the pupil premium rate is £1,550. The gap for disadvantaged pupils in 2025 was 10 months, and for persistently disadvantaged pupils it was 11 months (10% greater). Therefore, a proportional top up would be $10\% \times £1,550 = £155$. For secondary aged pupils, the pupil premium rate is £1,100. The gap for disadvantaged pupils in 2025 was 19.1 months, and for persistently disadvantaged pupils it was 22.4 months (17.3% greater). Therefore, a proportional top up would be $17.3\% \times £1,100 = £190$.

Embed persistent disadvantage in SEN reforms

The intersection between special educational needs and persistent disadvantage represents some of the deepest educational inequalities in the system. Yet persistent disadvantage is not currently recognised within SEN(D) and inclusion policy. As the Government introduces National Inclusion Standards, it must ensure persistently disadvantaged pupils are reflected by:

- Including representation from school leaders in high persistent disadvantage contexts on the Inclusion Advisory Panel.
- Ensuring school inclusion strategies, national standards and accountability frameworks identify and track outcomes for this group explicitly.

Teach First commitments

As well as asks from the Government, we recognise that the solutions are also partly within our own grasp. Stakeholders both within and around the sector can already bring about seismic change with the right resources and focus. As part of this campaign, we are pledging to:

- **Place teachers where they are needed most**, using the data in this report to prioritise schools with high levels of persistent disadvantage, large attainment gaps and teacher shortages, actively addressing the recruitment and retention challenges in these areas.
- **Research what works for persistently disadvantaged pupils** by establishing a headteacher working group comprising leaders from high performing schools and multi-academy trusts to share insights on best practice. We will share these findings with the sector.
- **Launch a new Coastal Target Areas initiative**, partnering with schools and multi-academy trusts in areas with high levels of persistent disadvantage to target teacher recruitment and placement into the communities identified in this report. The first pilots will run in Blackpool and Thanet, with progress measured by their impact on narrowing the persistent disadvantage gap.
- **Mobilise our community of 20,000 ambassadors** to get involved in the campaign, with initiatives to be announced later this year. Pledges will involve taking meaningful action, including volunteering in their communities or other Teach First activities.

Conclusion

Persistently disadvantaged pupils represent one of the most under-resourced groups in England's education system. Having spent the majority of their school lives in poverty, they face deep-rooted barriers that shape their attainment, their wellbeing and their long-term life chances. The evidence in this paper makes clear that the scale and persistence of the disadvantage they experience is unlike that of any other group.

Nowhere is this starker than in the transition beyond compulsory education. Persistently disadvantaged pupils are far more likely to end up not in education, employment or training (NEET), with more than a quarter (25.5%) falling out of sustained education or training after secondary school.

This is not a marginal difference but a profound failure of the system to support young people at the point where opportunity should be expanding, not narrowing. High NEET rates lock disadvantage in place, leading to poorer employment prospects, lower lifetime earnings and worse health outcomes. Not passing English and maths GCSEs creates severe barriers throughout a person's career, particularly at the beginning.

Yet the data also tells another story – one of possibility. Across the country, there are schools and local authorities demonstrating that persistent disadvantage does not have to determine a child's future. A minority of schools are already eliminating the attainment gap entirely, and many more are significantly narrowing it.

These successes show that with the right conditions, persistently disadvantaged pupils can and do achieve at high levels. The variation in outcomes across regions, local authorities and schools underscores that the issue is not inevitability, but inequity.

As the Government reviews how educational disadvantage is defined and funded, there is a critical opportunity to ensure that persistent disadvantage is recognised explicitly in policy and resourced accordingly.

Better data, stronger incentives for leadership in challenging contexts and a more nuanced accountability system can help ensure that support reaches the pupils who need it most.

Teach First is committed to continuing this work through our upcoming campaign. We are shining a light on the challenges faced by persistently disadvantaged pupils, amplifying the voices of teachers and school leaders, and pushing for the systemic changes needed to remove the barriers these pupils face.

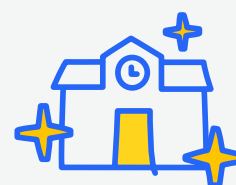
No child's future should be determined by the poverty they grow up in. By confronting persistent disadvantage directly – through better policy, stronger support and a renewed focus on equity – we can rewrite the future to ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive.



The scale and persistence of the disadvantage they experience is unlike that of any other group.



High NEET rates lock disadvantage in place, leading to poorer employment prospects, lower lifetime earnings and worse health outcomes.



There are schools and local authorities demonstrating that persistent disadvantage does not have to determine a child's future.

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