

Spotlight on Disadvantage

The role and impact of governing boards in spending, monitoring and evaluating the pupil premium.

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Executive summary

Key findings

Between February and April 2018, the National Governance Association (NGA) undertook a self-selecting survey of 875 governors and trustees and the thematic analysis of 36 pupil premium strategies. This revealed that governing boards often know their pupil premium pupils well, are heavily involved in championing the needs of pupil premium pupils and work closely with senior leaders to decide how to spend, monitor and evaluate the pupil premium. Nevertheless, there is still room for improvement – with the findings revealing some important factors for schools, policy makers and researchers to consider going forward.

For schools and governing boards the key findings from this project are:

- 1. While the majority of schools are making evidence-driven decisions when spending their pupil premium, some are still too inwards looking.** In particular, when deciding ‘what works’ when spending the pupil premium and monitoring its impact, many survey respondents favoured internal data and the opinions of staff over external sources of data such as academic research and the EEF toolkit.
- 2. Schools should adopt a more holistic outlook when deciding how to spend the pupil premium.** The survey data and analysis of pupil premium strategies show that many schools focus largely on teaching and learning initiatives. This is despite many of the key barriers to attainment identified by schools in the pupil premium strategies requiring more pastoral attention.
- 3. There was clear variation in the quality of pupil premium strategies published on schools’ websites.** Some schools were better at accounting for how the money would be spent, rationalising spending decisions, measuring success, setting out clear monitoring processes and clarifying which group the funding would target.
- 4. Pupil premium usage is not the only determinant of disadvantaged pupil progress and attainment.** The survey data revealed a clear correlation between outcomes for all pupils and outcomes for pupil premium pupils. Geography was also a factor in influencing outcomes for pupil premium pupils.

In addition, this study also revealed that:

- 1. Pupil premium was viewed positively by governing boards who responded to the survey, but funding pressures are presenting a challenge to its effectiveness.** Many schools fund initiatives through the pupil premium which should generally come out of the school budget, including: improving the classroom environment, improving feedback and hiring additional teachers. To mitigate against this, pupil premium funding needs to be protected in real-terms and accompanied by a more sustainable financial settlement for schools.
- 2. There are research gaps which need to be addressed going forward.** In particular, there is the potential for more research looking at pupil premium strategies and the role of those governing in shaping pupil premium usage. With the literature skewed towards teaching and learning, this project also exposed the need for more research around measuring the impact of pastoral initiatives.

Background

The pupil premium is money given to schools to ‘raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils of all abilities and to close the gaps between them and their peers’ (DfE and EFA, 2018).

Schools receive pupil premium funding based on every pupil on roll that is currently in receipt of free schools meals or has been in the last six years, those that have been looked after by the local authority at any point in their lives, and those whose parents currently or have previously served in the armed forces (DfE and EFA, 2018).

Official data shows a persistent (albeit narrowing) gap in attainment between those eligible for the pupil premium and non-pupil premium pupils nationally (DfE, 2014; 2018a; 2018b). In terms of progress, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) found that children eligible for the pupil premium were, on average, 4.3 months behind their peers when they first started school and, by the time the cohort sat their GCSEs, the gap between pupil premium pupils and their peers had risen to 19.3 months (Andrews *et al.*, 2017).

The purpose of this study and research methodology

The governing board is the accountable body for how schools spend the pupil premium. Yet, while there is a wealth of literature on how best to plan for and spend the pupil premium, the extent to which governing boards are involved in these decisions, how they perceive funding for disadvantaged pupils, and the impact governing boards have when they get involved is not clearly outlined in the literature.

To fill this gap, the NGA undertook a self-selecting survey of 875 governors and trustees. This asked participants how their school defines ‘disadvantage’, how their school chooses to spend the pupil premium and the extent to which those governing are involved in the pupil premium spending process. Of the 875 governors and trustees who responded to the survey, 416 provided additional information relating to their key stage 2 (in primary) or key stage 4 (in secondary) progress scores for pupils in receipt of the pupil premium. From this, it was possible to calculate a ‘snap shot’ of the progress gap between pupil premium pupils in respondents’ schools and all non-pupil premium

pupils nationally. This offered a more objective view of what those schools that are more effective at supporting pupil premium pupils have done compared to those that are less effective.

To supplement this data, thematic analysis of 36 pupil premium strategies was also carried out. The strategies selected for analysis covered a wide range of schools, including: equal numbers of primary and secondary schools; schools with different numbers of pupils; schools with different proportions of disadvantaged pupils; and schools with different progress gaps between pupil premium and non-pupil premium pupils.

The overlooked but important role of governing boards in spending the pupil premium

The NGA (2014) suggest that, when spending the pupil premium, school staff should lead on the day-to-day implementation of spending decisions but the governing board should be involved in:

1. understanding the best way to spend the pupil premium based on a variety of sources of evidence
2. signing-off on a pupil premium spending strategy based on an informed understanding of the ‘barriers to educational achievement’ facing eligible pupils and what works to overcome these barriers
3. reviewing and amending pupil premium allocation as a result of ongoing monitoring

Furthermore, the governing board, in conjunction with the senior leadership team, should be involved in scoping, signing-off and reviewing a strategy for spending the pupil premium. This should cover: how much funding the school receives; the ‘main barriers to educational achievement faced by eligible pupils at the school’; what the school has done to overcome these barriers; how the impact of the pupil premium will be measured; and when the next pupil premium review will take place (DfE, 2017).

Reporting on the extent to which NGA recommendations are followed in practice, the survey conducted as part of this research found that:

- 79.4% of respondents outlined that their governing board was involved in signing-off on a pupil premium spending strategy
- 89.7% of respondents' governing boards were involved in monitoring pupil premium spending
- 66.2% of respondents' governing boards were involved in reviewing and amending the pupil premium spending strategy

In contrast, only 17.1% of respondents said that their school left signing-off the pupil premium strategy to school staff while 9.6% left monitoring the pupil premium to school staff. A larger group, 31.1%, left reviewing and amending the pupil premium to school staff.

The governors and trustees surveyed were also enthusiastic about raising outcomes for pupil premium pupils and were engaged in decisions around spending the pupil premium. In particular, the survey findings suggest that governing boards play a crucial role in championing the needs of pupil premium pupils in governing board meetings. Of the 875 governors and trustees who responded to the survey:

- 86.3% of respondents outlined that their school(s) defined 'disadvantaged' pupils as those 'eligible for the pupil premium'
- 97.5% of respondents said that their governing board understood the demographics of pupil premium pupils to at least some extent
- over half of respondents claimed that outcomes, absence rates and exclusion rates for pupil premium pupils were discussed in every governing board or committee meeting

While the literature on the pupil premium rarely covers governance, these findings reflect other research which highlights the importance of governing board involvement in pupil premium spending. Previous work found that schools with 'weak' leadership were more likely to have large gaps between their least and most disadvantaged peers (Ofsted, 2014), with further research demonstrating an 'overlap' between a positive Ofsted judgement of governance and a positive judgement of progress for pupil-premium pupils (NAO, 2015).

Insights for schools and governing boards

As well as confirming that governing boards do play an important, and often substantive, role in spending, monitoring and evaluating the pupil premium, this study also revealed some important findings around how schools can maximise the impact of pupil premium funding.

Practical insight one

The best schools are making evidence-driven decisions when spending their pupil premium. However, many schools, including governing boards, are still too inwards looking and can improve practice by consulting a wider range of sources before making spending decisions.

Despite the positive role played by governing boards as outlined above, the survey data from this research suggests that many governing boards do not rate external sources of evidence as highly as internal sources of evidence when deciding how to spend and monitoring the impact of the pupil premium. As part of the survey, respondents were asked about which information sources governors and trustees valued the most when making decision on spending and evaluating the pupil premium. In this regard, internal data and the opinions of senior members of staff were prioritised over external data, academic research and the EEF toolkit. For example, just 14% of respondents said that the EEF toolkit was extremely important as a source of information, compared to 68% who said that the professional judgement of senior staff was extremely important.

This is an issue given that previous research suggests that schools with the best outcomes for pupil premium pupils are generally those who look outwards for information and ideas. The Department for Education (DfE) found that 30.5% of schools had sourced their most effective strategy from the EEF toolkit, a remarkably high figure given the toolkit's limited usage (Macleod *et al.*, 2015). The DfE also found that 56.6% of headteachers from primary schools which were more successful at raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils saw academic research as very important when deciding on initiatives, compared to 47% of headteachers from less successful primary schools (Macleod *et al.*, 2015). A National Audit Office (NAO, 2015) survey further mirrored these themes, finding that over 90% of school leaders who had consulted external sources of evidence found them useful. It is therefore apparent that the tendency for boards to look inwards limits their effectiveness in overseeing pupil premium spending.

Executive summary

These findings do not mean that internal data is less useful than external data. On the contrary, internal data is vital in monitoring the success of initiatives, especially given the fact that every school's context is slightly different. Nonetheless, internal data needs to be complimented by a wider range of sources to ensure that properly informed decisions are being made, with all options taken into account. Governing boards and senior leaders should be using an eclectic range of internal and external sources to decide upon and monitor initiatives. The key is using evidence to decide what is most likely to work and then adapting this to the specific school's context.

Practical insight two

The data from this study suggests that schools need to adopt a more holistic outlook when deciding on pupil premium spending. This means that, in the pupil premium spending strategy, teaching and learning initiatives should be accompanied by more pastoral initiatives which are often better at addressing the specific barriers to educational achievement which hold back pupil premium pupils.

The thematic analysis of 36 pupil premium strategies highlighted a 'disconnect' between the barriers and challenges facing pupil premium pupils and the initiatives funded through the pupil premium. Four of the five most commonly identified barriers to pupil premium pupils realising their potential were:

- family life (mentioned in 22/ 36 strategies analysed)
- low attendance (mentioned in 17/ 36 strategies analysed)
- social and emotional barriers to engagement (mentioned in 14/ 36 strategies analysed)
- individual pupil needs, especially pupils identified as having special educational needs, or English as an additional language (mentioned in 10/ 36 strategies analysed)

On the other hand, the three most common strategies in the same pupil premium strategies were:

- targeted interventions to support attainment of specific pupil groups (mentioned in 33/ 36 strategies analysed)
- literacy support (mentioned in 28/ 36 strategies analysed)
- numeracy support (mentioned in 26/ 36 strategies analysed)

As such, some schools do not appear to be tackling the root causes of many of the challenges that they diagnose, identifying pastoral barriers to educational achievement but focusing their pupil premium spending largely on teaching and learning initiatives. This may be because, compounding the issue, much of the literature is skewed towards assessing the impact of initiatives which focus on teaching and learning. While the findings from this research support the notion that the quality of teaching and learning is vital (see practical insight four), schools should adopt a more holistic outlook which recognises the value of both teaching and learning interventions and more pastoral initiatives. In doing so, they will need to carefully combine an awareness of the importance of evidence driven decision making with an acknowledgement that schools should measure what they value rather than simply valuing what they can easily measure.

Practical insight three

The quality of school practice in managing the pupil premium is highly variable. This highlights that there is significant room for improvement in how schools spend the pupil premium.

As part of the review of the 36 pupil premium strategies, this study looked at schools with good outcomes for pupil premium pupils compared to those where outcomes could be improved. From this comparison, five key themes of more and less effective practice were identified. Overall, the research found that schools with the best strategies:

- accounted for how every pound of their pupil premium budget was spent rather than using rounded numbers or vague estimations
- deployed evidence to justify their spending decisions, with references (for instance) to the EEF toolkit, academic research, internal data and Ofsted reports
- had a clear success criterion for each pupil premium initiative and an idea of what would be achieved through spending the pupil premium
- set out clear monitoring processes for continuously evaluating the effectiveness of spending
- clarified which group (i.e. all pupil premium pupils, just those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, or those struggling in a specific subject etc.) would receive the funding for each initiative

Of note, looking across all of the pupil premium strategies analysed, schools struggled to provide a rationale for some initiatives compared to others. Schools particularly did not provide a clear rationale for introducing initiatives around: widening the curriculum, sporting activities, recruiting an attendance officer, recruiting teaching staff and recruiting teaching assistants. In contrast, initiatives which were generally accompanied by effective rationales included: staff continuing professional development (CPD), targeted behavioural support and subsidising extra-curricular activities.

This research has demonstrated that there is scope for significant improvement in producing pupil premium strategies and that making these improvements could have a significant impact on raising outcomes for disadvantaged pupils.

Practical insight four

Although this research focused predominantly on the governing board's role in spending, monitoring and evaluating the pupil premium, it has also demonstrated that usage of the pupil premium is not the only determinant of disadvantaged pupils' progress and attainment.

One of the clearest correlations revealed through this research was that schools with high progress for all were very likely to have high progress for pupil premium pupils. This echoes previous work which found that 'statistical correlation between [schools] who do well for FSM [free school meal] children and who do well for non-FSM children is very high' (NFER/Sutton Trust, 2015).

Furthermore, the survey also revealed significant geographical divides in the progress gap. This highlights another important determinant of disadvantaged pupil progress and attainment, a school's location. The findings from this study also correlate with a significant body of literature surrounding the north-south divide (NPP, 2018) and support the research of Mike Treadaway (2017) who has recently argued that the progress gap is heavily dependent on the characteristics of the pupil premium cohort in a given school. These factors, such as ethnicity, create variation in different geographical areas.

As such, geography and school quality are two alternative determinants of disadvantaged pupil progress and attainment which illustrate that we can attribute some, but not all, of the differences in progress gaps between schools to the way in which the pupil premium is used.

Insights for policy makers and researchers

In addition to insights for governing boards and practitioners, this study also revealed potential avenues for future research and the complex and precarious position of the pupil premium within the current school funding landscape.

Policy insight one

Pupil premium is viewed positively, but funding pressures are presenting a challenge to its effectiveness. Pupil premium funding needs to be protected in real-terms and accompanied by a more sustainable financial settlement for schools. This will allow schools to spend the pupil premium effectively and ensure that it is targeted at the right pupils.

The picture which emerges from this research, and that of others, is that pupil premium needs to be protected, and that this can only be achieved through a more sustainable financial settlement for schools. DfE (2014; 2018a; 2018b) data shows that the attainment gap has been consistently falling at both key stage two and four since the pupil premium's introduction. Importantly, schools think the pupil premium has been vital in bringing about this trend. Indeed, the National Audit Office (NAO, 2015) has found that 75% of secondary schools and over 85% of primary schools felt that pupil premium had boosted pupil attainment.

However, pupil premium's positive impact appears to be threatened by the current funding climate. The survey findings from this project revealed that, although very few respondents actually claimed that their school used the pupil premium to plug the funding gap, only 71.6% of respondents ring-fenced their pupil premium. While there is no legal requirement on schools to ring-fence the pupil premium, this does suggest that many schools may be using the funding to subsidise other spending commitments. Further evidence from this research found a prevalence of initiatives which one might assume should be funded from the school's core budget but were commonly being funded through the pupil premium. This includes: improving the classroom environment, improving feedback and hiring additional teachers. This echoes findings from a recent NFER/Sutton Trust (2018) survey which found that 34% of senior leaders who responded admitted to using pupil premium funds to plug other budget gaps.

Pupil premium is therefore seen as having a positive impact on closing the gap, but the current funding climate is endangering these positive effects. It is important to note that, as part of NGA's consultation response on the national funding formula (NFF), NGA (2017) do not think the pupil premium should be given to schools as a separate grant but, instead, it 'should form part of the total [funding] pot'. As part of this financial package, however, schools 'could still be required to report on how they are supporting the progress and attainment of children entitled to the pupil premium' (NGA, 2017).

Policy insight two

This study found that there are research gaps which need to be addressed going forward.

This research has contributed to the literature on using the pupil premium effectively and has illuminated the important role played by those governing in spending, monitoring and evaluating the pupil premium. However, it has also exposed potentially fruitful avenues for further investigation.

This includes:

- The potential for more research looking at pupil premium strategies. Notably, this is the first significant piece of research to look at pupil premium strategies, despite these documents being publicly available and providing a clear indication of how pupil premium funds are being used on the ground. This research has highlighted that analysing these documents can reveal fascinating trends. Moving forwards, there is the potential for a larger study which could produce conclusions about how pupil premium is being spent nationwide and draw out the differences between varying school types and phases.
- Secondly, this research has exposed the skewing of the literature towards assessing teaching and learning initiatives over more pastoral activities. Looking at the impact of spending the pupil premium on pastoral initiatives, and focusing on the impact this might have upon social-emotional outcomes, would act as a vital counter-balance to the majority of the current research, including this study, which treats either the attainment gap or progress gap as the key measure of how successfully schools are spending their pupil premium allocation.
- Finally, this research has highlighted that most of the literature neglects the role played by those governing in shaping the usage of the pupil premium. In future research, measuring a school's success or failure in improving outcomes for pupil premium pupils cannot be fully understood without incorporating the role of those governing into the study.

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