

Tackling disadvantage in education

A toolkit for governing boards

Poverty

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NGA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning. Together, we're raising standards and shaping stronger governance to ensure every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.

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NGA would like to thank Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) for providing their expertise and support in the production of this toolkit.

CPAG work on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. They work to understand what causes poverty, the impact it has on children's lives, and how it can be prevented and solved – for good.

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How to use this toolkit

This toolkit is part of a series aimed at tackling disadvantage in education. It identifies the link between poverty and educational disadvantage, signposts resources to help tackle disadvantage, and includes questions for governing boards to explore.

We recommend that you first read our [Widening the lens guidance](#) which explains how to identify key areas of disadvantage in your organisation. [Other toolkits in this series](#) cover **special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), mental health and wellbeing, vulnerability** and **ethnicity**.

Making the link

The link between educational disadvantage and poverty is well documented. On average, the academic performance of pupils from families with less money falls below that of their more affluent peers ([IFS, 2022](#)). The relationship between educational attainment and poverty is one that continues into adulthood, with a child's educational achievement being the most influential factor affecting their later work prospects and so the risk of future poverty (ONS, 2014).

The pupil premium grant was set up to address these disparities and is widely used as a starting point to define disadvantage in schools. However, many children who are living in poverty are not eligible for free school meals (FSM) and do not qualify for pupil premium funding. [Child Poverty Action Group](#) (CPAG) analysis estimated this figure to be 900,000 school-age children. Under-registration for free school meals (FSM) also results in many pupils missing out on the additional support they require ([EPI, 2024](#)).

A child is considered to be growing up in 'relative poverty' if they live in a household whose income is below 60% of the average (median) income. Children who fall outside pupil premium eligibility but are considered to be living in poverty may not be readily identified and could miss out on targeted pupil premium strategies.

1. What the evidence tells us

- ‘Households below average income’ statistics for 2022-23 show **70% of children growing up in poverty live in a household where at least one adult is working** (CPAG, 2024).



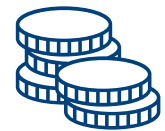
- 33% of parents and carers experiencing **financial strain** struggled to afford a warm winter coat, 40% a hot meal, and 60% school trips for their child (The Children’s Society, 2024).



- 33% (900,000) of school-age children in England are **living in poverty but are not entitled to free school meals** ([CPAG, 2023](#)).

- In 2023, by the time they took their GCSEs, **persistently disadvantaged pupils** (those who are eligible for free school meals for 80% or more of their school lives) were 22.9 months of learning behind their peers - marginally wider than it was in 2011 ([Education Policy Institute, 2024](#)).*

- The **cost of primary school children going to school** in the UK (not including additional childcare costs) is at least £864.87 a year (£18.69 a week). For families of secondary school children, the cost jumps to £1,755.97 a year ([CPAG, 2023](#))



- The **disadvantage gap in GCSE English and maths** has widened to 19.2 months in 2023; the largest gap since 2011. (Education Policy Institute, 2024).
- At primary school, the **disadvantage gap increased** between 2019 and 2023 from 9.3 to 10.3 months – the second largest gap since 2011, when it was 10.6 months (Education Policy Institute, 2024).
- 72% of students not eligible for FSM obtained at least a grade 4 in both English and maths GCSEs, however, only **43% of pupils eligible for FSM met the same benchmark** ([Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2024](#)). This disparity reflects systemic income-related inequalities, not a lack of ability or value for education.
- In the 2022-23 academic year, pupils eligible for FSM had almost **five times the rate of permanent exclusion** than their non-FSM peers (DfE, 2023).



- **Young people who face most barriers benefit more from careers education.** Meeting all eight Gatsby Benchmarks significantly reduces the likelihood of a young person from a disadvantaged community being out of education, employment or training (NEET) by 20%. This decrease in NEET levels translates to a £150 million annual saving for taxpayers. (Careers & Enterprise Company, 2023)

* Changes to the benefits system and FSM protections have made EPI’s persistent gap measures less accurate (more understated) in recent years, so it is possible the difference is wider.

2. Understanding poverty in your context

The challenge for governing boards and school leaders is to understand how poverty impacts their school or trust community and who is at increased risk of experiencing poverty without being overly reliant on pupil premium eligibility. It is important that the board take a collective responsibility for overseeing the wider impact of poverty.

Questions to explore:

- Does your curriculum offer represent the lives, histories and experiences not only of the community you serve, but also wider society?
- How is knowledge and understanding of equality and diversity built into the curriculum?
- How do assemblies, classroom discussions, pastoral activities and visits promote equality and diversity?
- Do school leaders and staff fully engage and consider the needs of ethnically diverse pupils when designing and delivering lessons such as PE and school sport? (For example, sports kit, activities, groupings, timing of enrichment/extra-curricular activities, cultural celebrations/religious festivals.)
- Does our extra-curricular provision account for the interests of different cultural groups in the school community?

Relevant resources

- [End Child Poverty](#) data shows child poverty levels and how they vary across nations, regions, local authorities and parliamentary constituencies. Explore the available interactive tools and data to understand child poverty levels in your area.
- The Youth Sport Trust has produced the Inclusive Health Check, a [self-review style development tool](#) to help identify areas to build upon your school's inclusive opportunities, and aims to provide you with research, resources and tips to enhance school sport provision.
- CPAG's [report](#) on the minimum cost of education provides an analysis of how much going to school really costs families across the UK, including which items cost families the most and what type of support is currently available.
- CPAG's [Cost of the School Day project](#) provides resources for schools and local authorities who are working to remove or reduce financial barriers to education.

Resources for increasing pupil premium impact

- [NGA's practical pupil premium monitoring tool](#) helps boards scrutinise pupil premium spending decisions, discuss the intended outcomes and evaluate impact.
- [NGA pupil premium questions for governing boards to ask](#) – a range of examples that governors and trustees may want to ask in meetings or monitoring visits.
- [Spotlight on disadvantage](#) – NGA's research report explores the governing board's role in spending, monitoring and evaluating the pupil premium.
- [The EEF guide to the pupil premium](#) – a practical guide to support schools to develop their pupil premium strategy based on evidence and meet DfE requirements.

3. Wider school culture

Questions to explore:

- How do you ensure that pupils in receipt of free school meals have parity of experience at lunchtime with their peers and what evidence do you use to assess this?
- Are levels of dinner money debt monitored by the governing board? Is the governing board aware of how dinner money debt is managed in a way that does not further disadvantage or stigmatise children?
- What is your ambition for the attainment and progress of pupils impacted by poverty?
- Have you identified the barriers that children from low-income households might have when accessing your enrichment/extra-curricular offer? How are you addressing this?
- How do you support all children to develop wider life skills such as resilience, communication, motivation and communication? Oracy skills are a key element of this work.

Relevant resources

- NGA's e-learning module, [a whole-school approach to food](#) demonstrates how boards can ensure a more equitable school food experience for pupils living in poverty.
- CPAG's report on the [cost of having fun at school](#) provides ideas, suggestions and good practice about how events can be made more inclusive and ensure all children can make the most of the school day.
- The Sutton Trust's '[Life Lessons](#)' looks at the barriers facing schools in delivering effective wider life skills and provides practical steps schools can take.

4. Careers education

Pupils experiencing disadvantage do not lack aspirations any more than their more affluent peers, but they are more likely to lack the opportunities, connections and sometimes inspiration to look beyond their current circumstance.

Those from communities experiencing socio-economic disadvantage may often only see the people in their immediate vicinity, so careers education has a vital role in highlighting jobs and opportunities to young people. A good quality careers offer can have a significant impact on reducing or closing the attainment gap and governors and trustees play a crucial role in making sure that happens.

Questions to explore:

- Do you have a nominated individual on your board who takes a strategic interest in careers education and guidance and encourages employer engagement?
- Does your board gather pupil views on the current careers education/guidance provision?
- Are pupils given the opportunity to explore possible careers linked to that subject?
- Are pupils shown a range of education pathways for different careers?

Relevant resources

- NGA guidance produced with the Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) on [providing and effective careers programme in the secondary phase](#)
- Careers resources from the CEC: [tools, CPD and support for governing boards](#)
- Education and Employers explore the importance of [career-related learning in primary schools](#)
- The Sutton Trust's '[Paving the Way](#)' provides an up-to-date picture of career guidance across secondary schools in England and advice for schools.

5. Policies

Governors and trustees have responsibility for setting policies relating to aspects of the school day that incur a direct cost for families and as such have an impact on pupils living in poverty.

Evaluating how these policies are put into practice and how they impact pupils' experience of school should be an area of consideration for boards.

Questions to explore:

- As a board, do you have an idea of how much it costs families to fully participate in all that your school offers? Is it affordable and accessible to all?
- What monitoring and data analysis do you undertake to determine whether there is equality of experience and opportunity at your school?
- How do you ensure that your policies are inclusive for low-income families?
- How does curriculum planning ensure that pupils experiencing poverty are not financially excluded from a wide range of school subjects, activities and trips? For example, PE, music, swimming, art and design, food technology.
- Does your current charging and remissions policy detail where charges can be requested as well as support for families that find school costs challenging?
- How are parents made aware of the support available? Is any associated documentation, whether those are policies or any other school communication, developed using accessible language and formatting?

Relevant resources

- NGA's guidance on [developing an affordable school uniform policy](#) and further practical ideas from [Affordable school uniforms: a guide](#).
- To calculate and review the current costs in your school, see [Turning the Page on Poverty](#).
- CPAG's '[Cost of the School Day calendar](#)' helps schools to identify possible financial barriers during the academic year and think about cost-conscious alternatives to mark important dates and events, so that all children and young people can take part

6. School admissions

The Sutton Trust's [Selective Comprehensives 2024](#) and [Social Selection on the Map](#) draw attention to the issue of social segregation in state secondary comprehensive schools. They show that the top-performing schools in England have on average fewer children eligible for FSM than the national average and often fewer than their local averages too. Essentially, children from lower-income families are less likely to attend the best schools, even if there is one in their neighbourhood. This has a long term impact on attainment with a correlation between the most socially segregated local authorities and the local authorities with the biggest attainment gaps.

This is a result of a complex set of factors, however, schools with lower levels of disadvantage than their surrounding areas can address this by looking at implementing admissions policies that do not rely on being able to afford a house within a certain proximity, explicitly promoting the support they offer children eligible for the pupil premium and ensuring all parent-facing documents are written in accessible language.

Questions to explore:

- How do we ensure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have
- equal access to our school?
- How does our community feel about our admissions processes, how do we know?
- How does the percentage of pupils who are eligible for Free School Meals in our school compare to national and local levels?
- How do our admissions processes and policies promote social diversity?
- How did we decide on our over-subscription criteria, do they promote our school values?
- Do any of our non-admissions related policies pose potential barriers for access to our school?

Relevant resources

- The Sutton Trust '[School Admissions Dashboard](#)' allows you to find your school to consider how inclusive your admissions practices are.
- [The Sutton Trust's Fair School Admissions Pledge](#) supports schools looking to become more inclusive and make changes in their school.

7. Staff training and CPD

Governing boards and school leaders should have confidence that staff understand indicators of poverty, know how poverty can impact academic attainment and can ensure barriers to participation in the school day are minimised.

Questions to explore:

- Does the whole staff team have awareness of how poverty impacts on children and families? What training have staff undertaken on poverty?
- Is the governing board and staff workforce aware of the financial barriers the school day can present to pupils and their families? How does the board monitor this?

Relevant resources

- [Children North East](mailto:info@povertyproofing.co.uk) at info@povertyproofing.co.uk and Child Poverty Action Group at UKcosd@cpag.co.uk provide training to raise awareness of poverty.
- Founder of Equity Literacy Institute, Paul Gorski published [an article on building a pedagogy of engagement for students living in poverty](#).

8. Engaging with families

In [NGA's 2022 annual survey](#), only 38% of respondents stated that their governing boards considered the views of disadvantaged pupils and their families. Providing opportunities for families experiencing poverty to share their experiences is crucial to inform planning and strategy development, and to ensure that schools are inclusive so that all pupils can succeed.

Schools can act as valuable community hubs through collaborating with other organisations to offer or signpost food banks, pre-loved clothing, providing resources, lending devices and offering extra-curricular clubs. This can help build relationships with parents while supporting parents economically.

Questions to explore:

- How do you ensure that you gather the views of children and parents from low-income families to inform school plans, vision and strategy?
- What opportunities are there for parents and pupils to give their feedback on school costs?
- How do you ensure that pupils do not face poverty-related stigma in your school?
- How does your school/trust ensure that relationships are developed between parents from different communities?

Relevant resources

- CPAG has produced a [short guide on supporting families in times of financial hardship](#).
- [Online survey templates](#) are available to help understand how families manage school costs.
- [Talking about Costs and Money at School](#) is a resource designed to open up or enhance a whole school conversation about costs and money.
- NGA's [guidance on parental engagement](#) provides tips and insight into how governing boards can enhance and build on their engagement with parents.

Further reading

- [Poverty in the UK: statistics](#) from the House of Commons Library sets out information on the levels of poverty in the UK, including trends and forecasts, as well as poverty by various characteristics.
- [More than a meal](#) – an independent evaluation of universal primary free school meals for children in London.
- [Child food insecurity and Free School Meals](#) – a report highlighting relevant research, evidence and stakeholder perspectives.
- [The Superpowers of Free School Meals Evidence Pack](#) presents key data and evidence on Free School Meals gathered from a range of independent sources.
- [The long shadow of deprivation: differences in opportunities](#) – 2020 research report from the Social Mobility Commission highlighting the differences in social mobility opportunities within local areas in England.
- [Child poverty and education outcomes by ethnicity](#) – Office for National Statistics report exploring how child poverty and educational outcomes vary for different ethnic groups.
- [EPI Annual Report 2024](#), looking at the state of education in England, with a focus on the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.
- [Ready for the Future: A review of Careers Education in England 2021/22](#) – research report which includes the impact of a good careers education offer on educational disadvantage.

