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Education in England: Annual Report 2020

Introduction and background

The Education in England: Annual Report 2020 **is published in partnership with the Fair Education Alliance (FEA) and Unbound Philanthropy. It looks at the state of education in England and examines the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers in terms of locality, different school subjects and different groups of pupils.**

Key points

Average attainment across phases

- To measure educational progress in the early years, the researchers use the total point score achieved by pupils in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), a teacher-led assessment at the end of Reception which measures social, behavioural and cognitive developmental goals. In 2019, the average EYFSP total point score was 34.6 (on a scale from 17 to 51), unchanged since last year.
- For primary level, attainment is measured using the average scaled score in reading and maths at key stage 2. In 2019, the average scaled score was 103.2. This has not changed since last year. Since the introduction of the scaled score key stage 2 tests in 2016, average attainment has improved by 1.9 scaled score points, the same as last year. The proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths has also increased from 57 per cent in 2016 to 68 per cent in 2019.
- At secondary level, pupils' average GCSE grade across all GCSE subjects is used. In 2019, the average GCSE grade was 4.5. This represents a very slight increase of 0.7 per cent (or 0.03 of a grade) from the previous year.

The disadvantage gap

- The disadvantage gap is measured by comparing the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and their peers. A pupil is defined as disadvantaged if they have been eligible for free school meals (FSM) at any point in the last 6 years.
- EPI researchers order pupils by their exam results and assign them a rank. The average rank of the disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupil groups is calculated and the latter is then subtracted from the former which yields a rank mean difference. This difference is then converted into months of developmental progress.
- The research covers the period from 2011 to 2019, except for early years in which results for 2011 and 2012 are omitted as they are based on the old EYFSP and therefore not comparable with later years.
- Over this period, the disadvantage gap has reduced by 1.4 months (12.8 per cent) at primary and 1.6 months (8 per cent) at secondary. The EPI's measure of early years attainment since 2013 suggests that very little progress has been made in closing the gap.
- Last year's Annual Report identified an increase in the size of the gap in 2018 at secondary and a slight increase at early years, for the first time in the time series.
- The EPI hypothesised in last year's report that 2018 could prove to be a turning point at which progress in closing the gap is reversed and begins to unravel. Results from 2019 support this hypothesis. At secondary and early years, the gap increased in 2018 and has since stabilised at these higher levels. In 2019 the gap has increased at primary level for the first time since at least 2007. Over the last five years, the headline measure of the gap at secondary level has not changed.

The disadvantage gap by GCSE subject

- The size of the disadvantage gap varies significantly by subject, ranging from 20.1 months in Music to -7.5 months in Biblical Hebrew.
- There is a participation gap in most non-compulsory subjects. Some of the largest of these are in Latin (72.8%), German (58.7%), physical education (46.5%), chemistry (51.4%) and music (38.3%).
- There are some non-compulsory subjects in which the gap is the other way round, i.e. subjects where entry rates are higher for disadvantaged students. The most notable are Bengali (204%), combined science (15.1%), and art and design (4%). Entry rates for disadvantaged pupils are also higher in Portuguese, Urdu, Turkish, Arabic and Persian.

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- The most inegalitarian subjects are Music and Physical Education, which have both high disadvantage gaps and high participation gaps This may be driven by parental investments in sport and music outside of school, such as private music and swimming lessons.
- The 2 compulsory subjects at GCSE – English and maths – have relatively large disadvantage gaps compared to other subjects: 17.5 months in maths and 16.2 months in English.
- Science subjects tend to have middling disadvantage gaps: 12.4 months for Chemistry, 13.5 for Physics, 13.7 for Combined Science and 14.5 for Biological Science. Although disadvantaged pupils are 15 per cent more likely to take Combined Science at GCSE than their non-disadvantaged peers, they are around 50 per cent less likely to take dual or triple sciences.
- Language subjects tend to have smaller disadvantage gaps, though they are also taken by much smaller shares of the pupil population.

Persistent disadvantage

- Using school census data, it is possible to create a longitudinal picture of the length of time pupils are eligible for free school meals over the course of their school lives. This provides an indication of the persistence of poverty and deprivation experienced by pupils. Persistently disadvantaged pupils are defined as those who are eligible for free school meals for 80 per cent or more of their school life.
- Analysis shows that there has been hardly any progress in closing the persistent disadvantage gap since 2011, particularly at secondary level. Over this period, the persistent disadvantage gap fell by just 0.4 months (3.4 per cent) at primary and 0.1 months (0.5 per cent) at secondary.
- Over the last 3 years, persistence of poverty has increased for disadvantaged pupils. Between 2011 and 2015, disadvantaged pupils were disadvantaged for a decreasing proportion of their school lives each year. However, in 2016, the amount of time during which they were disadvantaged started increasing. Similarly, from 2011 to 2017 the proportion of disadvantaged pupils who were persistently disadvantaged decreased, but in 2018 it started increasing for the first time in the time series. These trends roughly align with the trend for the disadvantage gap: a slowing of progress before a widening of the gap in 2018.
- This year, EPI has investigated the contribution which persistent disadvantage makes to the overall disadvantage gap.
- Analysis shows that since 2015, the high persistence group (i.e. those who have been disadvantaged for 80-100% of their school lives) has grown by 5 per cent, while the low persistence group has shrunk by 18 per cent. This reflects a rise in persistent poverty among disadvantaged pupils over the last few years.
- At 23 months, the gap for the high persistence group is over twice the size of the gap for the low persistence group (those who have been disadvantaged for less than 20% of their school life). The low persistence group have seen a reduction in the gap of 1.4 months (11.3%) since 2011, but the high persistence group have seen a reduction of just 0.1 months (0.5%).

The ethnicity gap

- The most striking changes over the last decade have been a widening of the gap by 3 months (77 per cent) for pupils from Any Other Black Background, by 4.4 months (68 per cent) for Black Caribbean pupils, and by 2.1 months (11 per cent) for late arriving EAL pupils. Meanwhile, pupils from Bangladeshi and Any Other Asian Backgrounds, who on average score higher at GCSE than White British pupils, have pulled away by 4 months.

Special educational needs

- There are two main categories of SEND pupils – those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (ECHP) (or, prior to 2014, a statement of SEND support) and those without. SEND pupils without an EHCP normally receive school support through regular school notional special needs budgets. SEND pupils with an EHCP are assessed to have more substantial needs; in this case, SEND support is mandated by, and in many cases partially funded by, the local authority.
- By the end of secondary school, SEND pupils with a statement or EHCP are over 3 years behind their peers, on average. SEND pupils without a statement or EHCP are 2 years behind.
- The gap for pupils with a statement or EHCP narrowed by 3 months (7.5%) from 2011 to 2015, but has since stagnated and even increased slightly, by 0.1 per cent. While the gap for pupils receiving SEND support without a statement or EHCP reduced by 3 months (9.6 per cent) in the four-year period from 2011 to 2015, in the 4-year period from 2015 to 2019 it closed by just 1.5 months (5.9%).
- This year the analysis included looked after children. It found that by the time they sit their GCSEs, looked after children are 29 months behind their peers. Meanwhile, children in need with a child protection plan are 26 months behind, and children in need without a child protection plan are 20 months behind.

Regional variation

- At secondary level, the areas with the highest disadvantage gaps are Blackpool (26.3 months by GCSE), Knowsley (24.7 months), and Plymouth (24.5 months). Those with the smallest gaps are predominantly in London such as Westminster (0.5 months), Redbridge (2.7 months) and Ealing (4.6 months).

Conclusion

- It is widely expected that the Covid-19 pandemic will increase the disadvantage gap significantly. This, combined with the fact that the gap was already beginning to widen prior to the pandemic, suggests that without targeted government action to close the gap there is a risk of undoing decades of progress in tackling educational inequalities.

The full document can be downloaded from:

https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-in-england-annual-report-2020/