

Cracks in our Foundations

Introduction and background

Foundational skills are the building blocks of future learning. However, every year thousands of pupils leave primary school without reaching expected standards in foundational skills (literacy, numeracy, and oracy). These children go on to secondary school ill-equipped to engage in further learning and unable to reach their true potential. A gulf develops between children with these foundational skills and those without, and the consequences of low literacy, numeracy, and oracy are present at every stage of a child's later education. In 2022, 41 per cent of pupils (275,000) completed year 6 without meeting the expected standards in reading, writing, and maths (combined). The situation is worse for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Last year, 57 per cent of children from disadvantaged backgrounds left primary school without reaching the expected standard in these subjects. The attainment gap for primary school children now stands at its widest level in a decade.

This report from the Centre for Social Justice sets out a series of recommendations to create an education system which allows all children to secure the foundational skills they need to thrive.

Key points and findings

State of the nation

- The Government's ambition is that 90 per cent of all students develop reading, writing, and maths skills to an expected standard by 2030. This would require a 30-percentage point jump in attainment levels from 2022. However, it seems unlikely that the education system is on track to achieve this ambition. Polling by the CSJ showed that, at the start of the academic year 2022-23, just 40 per cent of teachers felt confident that most of their pupils would meet expected standards in these subjects. Just 17 per cent are confident that this will be true for most of their disadvantaged pupils.
- SATs results in 2022 showed that the progress made in improving overall attainment over the previous decade had been largely reversed. School shutdowns had an immediate and detrimental impact on primary educational outcomes.
- Oracy is a foundational skill which is often overlooked. The APPG (All Party Parliamentary Group) on Oracy has adopted a broad definition of oracy as: "the ability to speak eloquently, to articulate ideas and thoughts, to influence through talking, to collaborate with peers, and to express views confidently and appropriately."
- There is a strong relationship between the level of foundational skills at the end of primary school and future academic success. In 2022, only 10 per cent of pupils who did not meet the expected standard in either reading, writing or maths when they were in key stage 2 achieved grade 5 or above in their English and maths GCSEs at the end of key stage 4.
- Levels of foundational skills impact all aspects of adult life including employment and health and the likelihood of being in trouble with the law. A high proportion of people who have been in prison in the UK have literacy levels far below the national average. Almost 6 in 10 prisoners in Britain have a reading age lower than an 11-year-old.
- According to a report by the Education Policy Institute, lost learning in the 2020-21 academic year was around 50 per cent higher for disadvantaged pupils than for non-disadvantaged pupils, thereby exacerbating inequalities.

Seeing parents as partners in education

- A systematic review of parental engagement by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) found that parental engagement led to improved academic success, such as better literacy and maths skills and closure of the attainment gap, and improved attendance at school. Furthermore, evidence from the EEF suggests that parental engagement can lead to 4 months of additional progress for an average student. The impact of parental engagement is higher in primary school than secondary and for pupils with low prior attainment.
- Improved parental engagement is particularly effective for disadvantaged pupils, who face additional barriers due to their home learning environment.
- Teacher surveys have highlighted several barriers to parental engagement, particularly for disadvantaged pupils. These include parents being confused about the work set by the school, and a lack of confidence in their ability to support their child.

Parents as partners: Recommendations

- The Department for Education (DfE) should outline a National Parental Participation Strategy. The strategy should create a new duty for multi-academy trusts (MATs) to focus on parental participation and publish parental participation plans. The DfE should also set out a structure for parental engagement which targets support towards those who need it most. It should clarify the responsibilities of other local agencies.



- The national strategy on parental engagement should create a duty for all multi-academy trusts and schools to establish parental engagement policies. These policies should be designed in consultation with parents and guardians. There should be an explicit focus on reaching families from more disadvantaged areas and using parental participation to reduce the attainment gap.
- It should be mandatory to appoint a Pupil Premium governor for all schools. This role is currently recommended to schools but making it mandatory would allow all schools to benefit. This role should be expanded to include holding the school to account on the extent to which they engage with parents from a disadvantaged background.
- There should be a pilot scheme of family support practitioners focused on schools in Education Investment Areas. Family support practitioners should be appointed to play a key role in supporting families with additional home learning needs.
- The National Parental Participation Strategy should outline the expectation for schools and Family Hubs to collaborate. The government should commission research on the best ways for Family Hubs to integrate with existing school services and examine the benefits of Family Hubs being collocated on primary school sites.
- The Government should seek to boost the number of parents on family learning courses. Family learning should become a core part of the DfE's plans to tackle the attainment gap. Primary schools should partner with Adult Community Education providers to deliver accessible family learning courses collocated on primary school sites.

Fixing the damage from COVID-19

- Any plans for the school system must account for the disruption caused by the pandemic and provide additional capacity to bolster catch-up provision, especially for the most disadvantaged pupils who are now further behind their peers than they have been for a decade.
- Levels of pupil absence are significantly higher than before the pandemic. Although the total number of children who are severely absent (missing 50% or more of school sessions) has come down in primary schools to 22,791, it still stands at a level which is 38 per cent higher than before the pandemic.
- A pupil's level of absence is a key determinant in whether they leave school with expected levels of foundational skills development. Less than half of all children who are persistently absent (missing 10% or more of school sessions) throughout key stage 2 achieve the expected standard in reading, writing, and maths.
- There is strong evidence for the effectiveness of extending school time as a way of improving academic attainment. The EEF estimates that extended school time can lead to 3 months additional progress.

Fixing the damage: Recommendations

- The DfE should appoint 2,000 school attendance practitioners to address the causes of school absence and remove barriers to engagement for severely absent pupils.
- The DfE should refocus the National Tutoring Programme (NTP) to focus on disadvantaged pupils

who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. It should also reinstate targets for the number of children eligible for pupil premium accessing the NTP.

- Schools should introduce an Enrichment Guarantee, offering weekly enrichment activities for all pupils. This could be trialled in primary schools across one local authority. To increase capacity, the government should look at the role of community groups and voluntary organisations in delivering the extra-curricular activities.

Strengthening the school system

- The quality of teachers is the single most important school-level factor concerning pupil outcomes, especially for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Schools that are more successful in raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils focus on improving classroom teaching first rather than looking at bolt-on strategies and activities outside of the classroom.
- According to a report by the Sutton Trust, disadvantaged pupils who are taught by a very effective teacher gain 1.5 years of learning over an academic year compared with 0.5 years of learning when taught by a low-quality teacher.
- It is therefore a concern that recruitment and retention difficulties are widespread across the education system, and that they are particularly acute in areas of disadvantage. The latest NFER data for 2020 shows that primary schools with the highest proportion of FSM eligible pupils spent £128.30 per pupil on supply teachers, compared to £88.10 in schools with the lowest proportions of FSM eligible pupils.

Strengthening the school system: Recommendations

- The DfE should explore the feasibility of introducing an undergraduate level Degree Apprenticeship for primary school teachers. Schools would be able to use existing Apprenticeship Levy funding to invest in existing staff members and to develop teaching support staff who may not have an undergraduate degree.
- There should be a ring-fenced fund for continuing professional development (CPD) focusing on teacher's understanding of how to develop foundational skills in the classroom.
- The DfE should review the free school meals eligibility threshold and the academic outcomes of children by the length of time that they have been eligible for free school meals.
- The Department should outline plans to enable primary school teachers to better identify and provide support for SEND in the classroom. The DfE should provide training for teachers identifying and supporting SEND in the classroom and should map cold spots of SEND support provision, such as the availability of speech and language therapists.
- The Department for Education should introduce new National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) for Leading Numeracy and Leading Oracy. Oracy education should be placed on an equal footing with literacy and numeracy by introducing oracy in the National Curriculum and piloting new Oracy Hubs, in the style of English and Maths Hubs.

The full documents can be downloaded from:

<https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/cracks-in-our-foundations>