

# Tackling low educational achievement

Findings  
Informing change

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Tens of thousands of students in England leave school every year aged 16 with no or very limited qualifications. This research aims to understand the large number of factors associated with low achievement.

## Key points

- Nearly half of all low achievers are white British males.
- White British students on average – boys and girls – are more likely than other ethnic groups to persist in low achievement.
- Boys outnumber girls as low achievers by three to two.
- Chinese and Indian pupils are most successful in avoiding low achievement. Afro-Caribbean pupils are the least successful on average, though their results have been improving.
- Eligibility for Free School Meals is strongly associated with low achievement, but significantly more so for white British pupils than other ethnic groups. Other indicators related to low achievement, as measured in the immediate area round the student's home, are:
  - levels of unemployment;
  - single parent households; and
  - parents with low educational qualifications.
- Poor reading and writing scores at primary school are significantly associated with later low achievement.
- Not speaking English at home is typically a short-lived handicap: African and Asian students who experience it commonly recover by secondary school.
- Disadvantaged students are more likely to attend poorly performing secondary schools, and can miss out on the best teaching as a result of the 5A\*-C GCSE target.
- Looked-after children and those with Special Educational Needs often do not get the support they require.
- Good schools that are particularly effective in helping students to avoid low achievement are not uniformly distributed across Local Authorities.
- Expenditure on students and a higher ratio of teachers to pupils do play a positive part, particularly for low-achieving students.

## The research

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## Background

The study surveyed existing research and analysed national data for England. Four different measures of low achievement were used: students who receive no passes at all in their GCSE/GNVQ exams at Key Stage 4; those who obtain nothing better than a 'D' in any exam; those who do not achieve a pass in at least one of English or Mathematics; and those not achieving at least five passes at any grade including English and Maths.

The great majority of low achievers – more than three-quarters – are white and British, and far more are boys than girls. They come mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds. But many students from the same backgrounds succeed. The girls come from the same families and mostly go to the same schools, but do much better. Low achievers are commonly to be found in poor urban areas, but there is very considerable variation by schools and Local Authorities. Some schools with high proportions of disadvantaged pupils do much better than others. And there is a considerable range of performance among different ethnic groups. So disadvantage is not the only factor.

Those with no passes at all number about 5 per cent and those with no pass better than a D make up about 25 per cent of school leavers in the state system. These students are likely to be badly placed in the job market, and in general inadequately prepared for participation in society. Many of them are at risk of unemployment or even falling into low-level criminal activity.

## Differences in achievement

The analysis found nearly half of all low achievers are white British males. White British students on average – boys and girls – are more likely than other ethnic groups to persist in low achievement. If they start in the lowest categories of achievement in primary school, they are more likely than other ethnic groups to remain there at the end of secondary school.

Boys outnumber girls as low achievers by three to two. But the gender gap is larger for some ethnic groups – Bangladeshi, Pakistani and African – among those not achieving any passes above D. Eligibility for Free School Meals, the main measure of disadvantage in the data, does not affect boys and girls differently, other things being equal.

The study confirms that Chinese and Indian pupils are the most successful in avoiding low achievement; Afro-Caribbean pupils are the least successful on average, though their results have been improving faster than the national average, and when compared with white British pupils of similar economic backgrounds, they do no worse.

## Factors associated with low achievement

Eligibility for Free School Meals is strongly associated with low achievement, but significantly more so for white British pupils than other ethnic groups. Other indicators of disadvantage, all measured in the immediate area round the student's home, are also statistically associated with low achievement, such as:

- the neighbourhood unemployment rate;
- percentage of single parent households; and
- the proportion of parents with low educational qualifications.

Children with Special Educational Needs understandably comprise a considerable proportion of low achievers, but other studies show that more could be done to assist them through their schooling. The same is true of looked-after children.

Poor reading and writing scores at primary school are strongly and significantly associated with later low achievement, but not speaking English at home is a short-lived handicap. African and Asian students commonly recover from it by secondary school.

Boys generally do worse than girls in reading at primary school, and much worse in writing: 79 per cent of boys compared with 87 per cent of girls obtained Level 4 in reading in 2006; in writing the relative scores were 59 per cent of boys, to 75 per cent of girls.

## The impact of schools

The study found that schools do make a difference to outcomes. While students' social and economic circumstances are the most important factors explaining their educational results, about 14 per cent of the incidence of low achievement is attributable to school quality.

Good schools – those that are particularly effective in helping students to avoid low achievement – are not uniformly distributed across Local Authorities. They are concentrated in some Local Authorities more than

others, and there is considerable variability in school quality between Local Authorities.

The research could only account for some school features that make for reductions in low achievement; the rest is due to things that could not be measured in the data, which could be factors such as school ethos and leadership, or the effectiveness of teaching. But expenditure on students and, to a lesser extent, the number of teachers per pupil, do play a positive part. Resources matter, particularly for low achieving students. The study also found that some government programmes have helped to reduce low achievement, such as Excellence in Cities and Specialist Schools.

## Policy implications

The policy implications of the study derive from the researchers' own work and a survey of others' research, and on what a variety of other reports have to say about relevant policies. The assessment is that progress is being made – many government policies and initiatives are well founded and are having positive effects. But some are not being implemented as they should be, in particular those designed to help children with Special Educational Needs, and looked-after children, and some policies are actually contributing to low achievement. A number of policies are overdue for reconsideration.

### *Influences outside school*

Pre-school education, parenting help, income support, and everything which improves the home learning environment have major parts to play in reducing later low achievement. All these measures are essential components of what needs doing. It is by no means up to primary and secondary schools alone.

### *Poor literacy*

Poor literacy results in primary school are a strong risk factor for later low achievement, and have little to do statistically with not speaking English at home. Other, official data indicate that the National Literacy Strategy had positive initial effects, but the results have reached a plateau. The Strategy is failing to reach a significant share of pupils. Some studies suggest that in its current mode the Strategy does not follow the evidence of research, and that there is a case for changing it. At the same time children with particular reading difficulties need to be better identified; and the additional help they require, such as can be provided by Reading Recovery, is often missing and should be more readily available.

### *Secondary schooling*

While much of low achievement is due to social and economic disadvantage and to poor early results in literacy, the study also shows that many children make a satisfactory start in primary school and fall

behind later. While some of this is also due to their circumstances, there is much to be improved in the secondary school system that would benefit low achievers:

- The present study, as well as those from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and from other researchers, finds that disadvantaged students are likely to *attend worse-performing schools*. This can affect their outcomes adversely and does so particularly for minority ethnic students and students with Special Educational Needs. Policy prescribes support both for the latter and for looked-after children but this is often absent in practice.
- Anything which gives schools greater opportunities to *select* their pupils works to the detriment of the disadvantaged; the current ways in which school places are allocated is part of the process by which the disadvantaged end up disproportionately in worse-performing schools. Measures which assist fair selection will help them.
- Research has shown that national school *league tables* based on the 5A\*- C GCSE target have adverse effects for low achievers, as schools often concentrate resources on better performers. If targets are to continue, they need to be broadened.
- Expert opinion expresses a degree of concern about aspects of government plans for the further development of *practical and vocational* education, which could play an important part in contributing to greater engagement by students. A great deal is hanging on the new specialised diplomas which are about to be introduced; it is essential that they be established on a basis which provides satisfactory paths through the school system.
- The study finds that *resources* can make a difference to student outcomes. It is unfortunate that while Local Authorities receive funding in part according to the extent of disadvantage in their schools, they have not been able to pass on the funds to schools on that basis. Steps are in train to reverse this. There are very large differences between schools and Local Authorities in the amount spent on each pupil. Schools should receive the funding they need; but it is likely to be necessary to direct funding in particular ways to help disadvantaged pupils.
- Resources are not everything. Various *government programmes* to help low achievers have been evaluated in the literature and found to be successful, but deserve to be more widely followed. These include Aiming High, an initiative to assist Afro-Caribbean students, and Working Together,

an agenda for encouraging student participation in school management and practice. *Charitable programmes* such as those provided by The Prince's Trust and Foyer have also proved to be effective in helping teenagers who are not doing well in school. The same is true of a number of other activities (detailed in the full report) to improve poorly performing schools and help low achieving students. Many have shown positive results at relatively low cost and could profitably be extended.

## Conclusion

There is an agenda which will reduce low achievement. It means reaching more fully those who most need help – children in public care, those with Special Educational Needs and those very much larger numbers who are not in desperate plight but still need considerably greater help from the education system. The agenda lies in pre-school, primary schools and secondary schools. Early-years provision has to do better in reaching the most disadvantaged, particularly to help improve parenting and early learning. In schools there is a need for some reallocation and enhancement of expenditures; reform of features of the school system which actually contribute to low achievement; and addressing the other policy priorities listed above. All these could considerably reduce the numbers of young people who currently leave school with difficult prospects. Giving far greater priority to reducing low achievement by these means would represent money and effort well spent, both for the individuals concerned and for society at large.

## About the study

The study was based on data from the Pupil Level Annual School Census and the National Pupil Database for 2003, but also compared the 2006 results, which were little changed. Associated Census and OFSTED data were also employed. A profile of low achievers is presented in the full report in tables and maps, by gender and ethnicity, by Local Authority and other categories. The analysis also shows how the descriptive statistics of low achievement are modified by analysis that allows for other factors. A range of econometric methods were used, and included the construction of a data panel for estimating school effects.

The authors' findings are set in the context of a full survey of other research, and of public documents from the DfES, OFSTED and many other bodies. While the core of the project has been its statistical work, Professor Cassen also visited schools and colleges between 2005 and 2007, interviewed educationalists and officials of Local Authorities, and attended various education conferences.

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## For further information

The complete statistical analysis, *Understanding low achievement in English schools*, by Geeta Kingdon and Robert Cassen, is available as Case Paper 118 on the LSE/CASE website: <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/case/publications/papers.asp>

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The full report, **Tackling low educational achievement**, by Robert Cassen and Geeta Kingdon, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

You can also download this report free from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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