

Lost Learning

Why we need to level up education



ONWARD >

New
Schools
Network

About Onward

Onward is a campaigning thinktank whose mission is to develop new ideas for the next generation of centre right thinkers and leaders. We exist to make Britain fairer, more prosperous and more united, by generating a new wave of modernising ideas and a fresh kind of politics that reaches out to new groups of people. We believe in a mainstream conservatism – one that recognises the value of markets and supports the good that government can do, is unapologetic about standing up to vested interests, and assiduous in supporting the hardworking, aspirational and those left behind.

Our goal is to address the needs of the whole country: young as well as old; urban as well as rural; and for all parts of the UK – particularly places that feel neglected or ignored in Westminster. We will achieve this by developing practical policies that work. Our team has worked both at a high level in government and for successful thinktanks. We know how to produce big ideas that resonate with policymakers, the media and the public. We will engage ordinary people across the country and work with them to make our ideas a reality.

Onward is an independent, not-for-profit thinktank, registered in England and Wales (Company Registration no. 11326052).

About NSN

An unacceptable number of children fail to reach their potential because they lack access to an excellent education. Too often, a child's background dictates their destination in life, entrenching inequality and impacting communities for generations to come.

New Schools Network is an independent charity passionate about ending educational inequality once and for all. We envisage a country where every child has an equal chance to succeed in life, irrespective of their background. Through our programmes, we partner with individuals, groups, trusts and business leaders to establish, run and improve pioneering and innovative schools. New Schools Network is powered by a dynamic and enthusiastic team, united by a passion for improving life chances for children through education.

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	1
<i>Summary of the argument</i>	3
<i>Recommendations</i>	7
<i>Uneven playing field: The need to level up education</i>	9
<i>Drivers: What characterises underperforming schools?</i>	26
<i>Learning lessons: The history of school improvement</i>	36
<i>Solutions</i>	42
<i>Conclusion</i>	57
<i>Endnotes</i>	59

Foreword



The last eighteen months have put unimaginable strain on our schools. Taking children out of school and reducing lesson plans to laptops has disproportionately undermined the education of the most disadvantaged in society. There is rightly a focus on getting schools back to where they were before the pandemic. My experience, and the findings of this report, show that this will be nowhere near enough.

Levelling up has come to mean a wealth of different things, but ultimately it comes down to improving opportunity. We all have talent but tragically opportunity is not distributed evenly. There is no part of society where this is more true, and more important, than in education.

Progress 8 scores in my constituency in Stoke-on-Trent, for example, are the seventh lowest in the country. This tells us that compared to their peers around England, young people in Stoke-on-Trent are falling behind. This isn't their fault: out of the fifteen mainstream secondary schools, only one is rated outstanding and a third are requiring improvement.

Nor can ambitious parents or talented kids easily travel to attend a better secondary school nearby. The neighbouring West Midlands local authorities of Newcastle-under-Lyme, Stafford and Staffordshire Moorlands only have one outstanding secondary school between them. This compares to eight outstanding secondary schools in Westminster, with 16 more in neighbouring Camden, Kensington and Chelsea, and Southwark.

That's why we need to level up education. To give people a chance to make the most of their talents and achieve their potential, no matter where they go to school. That means a long-term, radical plan for school reform as set out in this report. Not accepting underperformance, using proven multi-academy trusts as a vehicle for change, backing great teachers who can make the difference.

Anything less is not only a disservice to children in Stoke-on-Trent, Knowsley, Doncaster, Derbyshire and elsewhere, but a guarantee that our efforts to level up will only go so far.

Jonathan Gullis MP, Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent North



Summary of the argument



The pandemic has contributed to a profound shock to the education system. It will take years, and billions of pounds, to fix. But well before coronavirus closed schools, many pupils were already suffering lost learning: in stubbornly underperforming schools around the country. This paper looks beyond the immediate challenges that recovering from the pandemic poses to the longer term systemic problems in England's schools, which leave hundreds of thousands of parents unable to send their children to a good or outstanding school in communities across the country.

The Prime Minister has defined the problem that levelling up aims to solve in the sentence: "talent is everywhere but opportunity is not". This is the idea that, through no fault of their own, and no matter how hard they work, many people suffer from a lack of opportunity in the place they call home. Their talents are left frustrated, their potential goes unrealised, and their resentment builds, as opportunities accrue to people and places elsewhere. It is a problem that sits at the heart of much of Britain's post-Brexit politics and this Government's mandate.

But fixing it will require more than the staples of levelling up debate: investment and jobs. Despite a decade of bold education reforms, many of the places with the weakest local economies also suffer from stubbornly underperforming schools and fragile education systems. These hold back pupils' progress and limit parents' options to secure a good school place for their child. Our findings reinforce the extent to which educational opportunity is still determined by geography and suggest that systemic education reform must accompany economic policies if the levelling up agenda is to be a success:

At primary school level:

- In 2018, the latest year for which data is available, there were more than 200,000 primary age children living in localities where the only schools available had been deemed Inadequate or Requiring Improvement by Ofsted.
- Primary pupils living in Yorkshire and the Humber, East Midlands and the South West are about 12 times as likely as likely to live in an area with a higher than average share of pupils attending underperforming schools than equivalent children in London or the North East.
- There is a particular issue with primary school quality along and above the East and West Midlands border. Many of the poorest performing local authorities for primary education are situated in this belt, including Wellingborough, Kettering, South and North East Derbyshire, and Doncaster.

At secondary level, a different but equally concerning pattern of disparity is visible:

- A secondary school pupil living in the North of England is around five times as likely to attend an underperforming school than one of their peers living in London.

- 11 out of 12 local authorities in the North East (92 per cent) have a higher than average share of pupils attending an underperforming school, shortly followed by the North West (77 per cent).
- This drop off between performance in the North of England at primary level compared to at secondary level is pronounced, suggesting that it is school quality, rather than demographic characteristics, which is driving underperformance.

At post-16 level, we find previous educational disadvantage is often compounded:

- The places that suffer underperforming schools and lower attainment tend to have fewer pupils continuing education after Key Stage 4. For example, more pupils fail than succeed in achieving two or more Level 3 qualifications in Knowsley, North Lincolnshire, Southampton, Swindon and Middlesbrough. These are all among the weakest local authorities for pre-16 education.
- These places also tend to have lower shares of pupils continuing in mainstream education after Key Stage 4. You are 8 per cent more likely to continue in mainstream education after KS4 if you live in London than if you live in the North East.

The link between levelling up and education is further reinforced by the fact that many of the places with the lowest levels of educational opportunity also score highly on indices of deprivation and social fabric, with coastal and post-industrial towns dominating. The message is clear: if ministers are to deliver on the promise of levelling up, they will have to take steps to overturn years of stubborn underperformance among England's schools. This will mean addressing a number of factors linked to underperformance.

First, ministers desperately need to encourage great teachers and school leaders into underperforming places. The regions with the highest share of underperforming schools have the highest vacancy rates, with nearly one in every 100 teacher roles (0.8 per cent) in the North East currently vacant, as well as the lowest Ofsted leadership ratings and the highest share of teaching assistants.

Second, ministers should take steps to ensure schools are not able to increase performance by restricting admissions to easier pupils. We find that across similarly income-deprived school neighbourhoods, inadequate schools take an average of 6 per cent more FSM pupils at primary level and 4 per cent more at secondary level than outstanding schools.

Third, ministers will need to be bolder when both individual schools and local areas continue to underperform despite multiple interventions. Several areas in the Opportunity Areas programme, for example, have seen school standards fall further after four years of investment and focused attention.

We propose a series of long-term reforms to level up school choice and opportunity in the places where both are weakest. These include proposals to much more aggressively use multi-academy trusts as the engine of school improvement, by both holding them to account for their ability to turnaround underperforming schools, and by offering the best MATs generous funding to take on struggling schools in areas with little choice. Where schools are still stuck after multiple attempts at intervention and re-brokering, we argue there is a case for them to be closed down and replaced with a new “Phoenix” free school. And to improve teacher quality and availability, we propose paying a generous salary bonus to outstanding teachers willing to move to a struggling school for three years, as well as expanding the Curriculum Fund to roll out knowledge-based materials to a broader range of schools and teachers.

The past year has underlined the importance of school. The Government’s response must not just be a short-lived attempt to repair the damage wrought by lost learning but a lasting effort to reduce the opportunity gaps which have blighted the school system for decades. We must level up learning, and with it people’s opportunities.

Summary of recommendations

Problem

Despite a decade of school reform, there remain many places in England where parents have little choice but to send their children to Requiring Improvement or Inadequate schools.

Over 200,000 primary age children live in local areas where there are no good or outstanding schools and 11 out of 12 local authorities in the North East have a higher than average share of pupils attending an underperforming school.

Areas of stubborn school under performance are disproportionately in places that suffer other forms of disadvantage, such as deprivation or weak social fabric, and strongly correlate with other levelling up measures.

There exists a large number of “stuck schools” which, despite repeated interventions, re-brokering and investment, have not been able to improve quality and continue to deprive pupils of the benefits of a great education.

The best schools benefit from exceptional leadership and talented teachers. Underperforming schools, in contrast, are often characterised by high vacancy rates, low pupil-teacher ratios and high levels of teaching assistants. While no national data exists, there also appears to be wide variation in time spent in school.

Solution

The Government should mobilise Multi-Academy Trusts as the engine of school improvement by:

1. Benchmarking MATs on the basis of their track record at turning around underperforming schools.
2. Re-introducing generous additional funding for MATs to take over underperforming schools or to expand into areas with few or no good schools.
3. Allowing schools to leave their multi-academy trust to join a better suited MAT or spin out into their own MAT in limited circumstances.
4. Expand the Curriculum Fund to encourage MATs to share their pedagogical approach to learning.

The Government should take steps to reduce the barriers to re-brokering or closing down underperforming schools:

5. As a last resort, be prepared to close down stubbornly underperforming schools and fund a new wave of “Phoenix Schools” - using the free school model - to replace them.
6. Work to release underperforming schools from restrictive PFI contracts, where this is limiting their ability to attract a new sponsor.

The Government should introduce direct incentives to improve the quality of teaching in the areas that need it most:

7. Encourage outstanding teachers to move to an underperforming school for a minimum of three years by introducing a £10,000 salary top up payment.
8. Introduce a “Teacher Premium” to be allocated per teacher in underperforming schools, to be spent on training and continuous professional development.

9. Review the use of supply teachers and teaching assistants by encouraging both maintained and academy schools to declare their relevant spending.
10. Introduce a Queen's Award for Education for teachers, headteachers and organisations that produce exceptional educational results and promote social mobility.
11. Review the amount of time spent in school, with a view to increasing the length of the school day, shortening holidays and increasing the use of extracurricular activities in low cost ways.

Despite numerous efforts to improve educational outcomes among disadvantaged pupils, most notably the pupil premium allowance, deprivation continues to be the biggest determinant of attainment and the disadvantage gap has remained the same since 2015.

Ofsted should consider ways to improve accountability for schools and reduce gaming of the admission of disadvantaged pupils, by:

12. Considering how the current framework could better account for pupil characteristics, especially given renewed oversight of outstanding schools, marking up those that deliver disproportionate improvement for disadvantaged pupils.
13. Introducing stronger guidance around the use of Pupil Premium to ensure it is being spent on proven interventions, such as tutoring, with greater scrutiny of Pupil Premium spending in the inspection framework to encourage uptake.

The Opportunity Areas programme has had limited effect, hampered by its limited scope of the toolkit used to deliver improvement.

Instead of expanding the Opportunity Areas programme to new areas, ministers should:

14. Reform the programme to set a clear threshold for inclusion and to introduce much more direct intervention, including incentives for successful MATs to take on multiple schools, powers for Regional Schools Commissioners to intervene, and the rollout of knowledge rich curriculum practices throughout the local area.
-

Uneven playing field

The need to level up education outcomes



The pandemic has exposed the devastating impact when children are not given access to high quality teaching and a structured learning environment. While the national impact of the last year has been - and will continue to be significant - many local areas have suffered from lost learning and depressed outcomes for years or even decades as a result of stubborn underperformance in local schools. This is despite a decade of sustained education reforms, at both local and national level.

This chapter explores the geographical variation in school quality and pupil attainment, to expose the extent to which opportunity remains determined by geography at primary, secondary and post-16 level. In doing so, we identify which parts of England are most in need of greater intervention and support and how that maps onto wider challenges around levelling up, such as deprivation and weak social fabric.

Primary schools

There is considerable evidence about the importance of primary learning on future educational outcomes.¹ In this section, we use data on every state-funded primary school in England, considering their Ofsted rating at district and unitary local authority level.² At the time of writing, the most up to date data is of March 2019.

The average local authority has 13 per cent of primary pupils attending an underperforming school. In Figure 1 below, we can see that when we compare individual local authorities to this national average, there is wide variation between how different areas perform. In some places, there are very few or no children attending an underperforming school but in others children face significant barriers to succeed, due to a dearth of high quality schools, and in some cases no good or outstanding schools at all.

As you can see from Figure 1 below, the geographic pattern of underperformance at primary level is relatively well distributed around England, with no strong regional clustering at local authority level. The East Midlands has the weakest access to good or outstanding schools, with 73 per cent of local authorities having more than the average share of pupils attending underperforming schools. This is followed closely behind by the South West and Yorkshire and the Humber, with 72 per cent and 71 per cent respectively.

At the other end of the spectrum, fewer than one in ten local authorities in London and North East have an above average share of pupils in underperforming schools. This means there are much fewer places in good primary schools for children in the East Midlands, South West or Yorkshire and the Humber than their peers in London. The relative strong performance of the North East and West is worth noting, given that we see a very different picture at secondary level.

Figure 1: Percentage of pupils in underperforming primary schools by local authority

Source: Ofsted Inspection Data 2019, Onward analysis

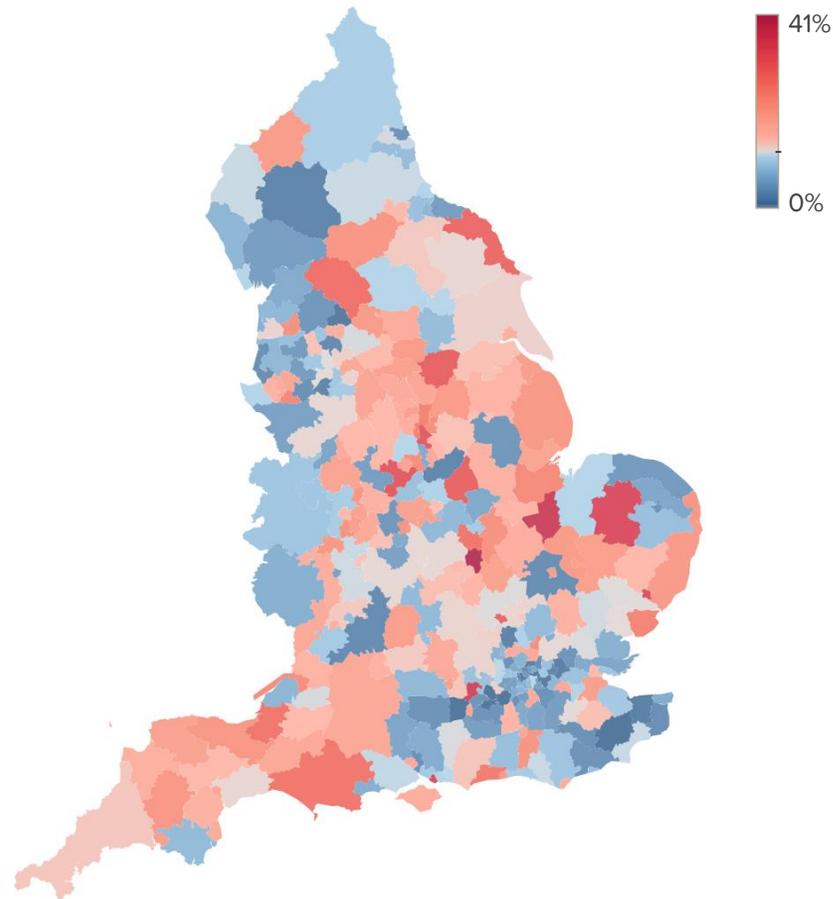


Figure 2: Share of local authorities within the region that exceed the national average for pupils attending underperforming schools

Source: Ofsted Inspection Data 2019, Onward analysis

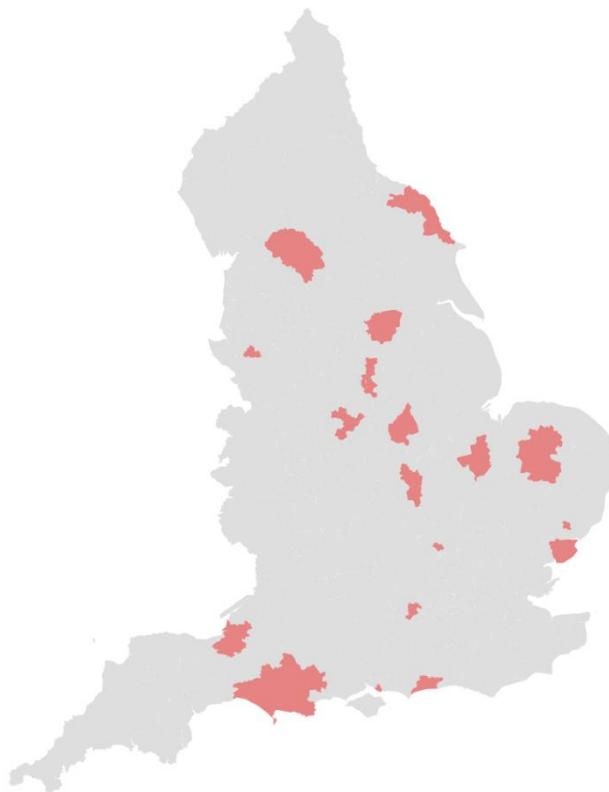


Using this methodology we can also identify the places that are the worst performing. Whilst these local authorities are fairly evenly spread, there is a noticeable concentration of underperforming areas along the Midlands border, including Wellingborough, Kettering, Derbyshire and Doncaster. A number of these local authorities were also recipients of the Opportunity Areas programme.

Table 1 and Figure 3: Bottom 20 local authorities by share of pupils attending underperforming primary schools.

Source: Ofsted Inspection Data 2019, Onward analysis

Rank	Local authority	Share of pupils
1	Wellingborough	42%
2	Fenland	37%
3	Bracknell Forest	37%
4	Breckland	35%
5	Gosport	35%
6	Ipswich	34%
7	South Derbyshire	32%
8	Ashfield	32%
9	Doncaster	31%
10	Melton	31%
11	Luton	30%
12	Scarborough	29%
13	Craven	28%
14	Kettering	27%
15	Sedgemoor	27%
16	Dorset	27%
17	Arun	26%
18	Bolsover	25%
19	Tendring	25%
20	Halton	24%

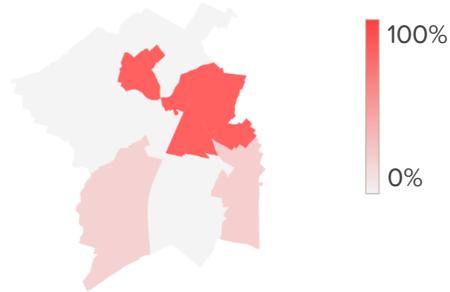


The sheer number of primary schools in England means that it is possible to consider smaller geographies too. In this section we use a smaller geography, Middle Super Output Areas (MSOAs), to conduct a more granular analysis. This is not a perfect proxy for catchment areas, and many MSOAs will cross over catchment boundaries, but they cover similar areas: MSOA geographies have a median average size of 3.04 sq km and the average travel distance to school by 5 to 10 year olds in 2019 was 1.9 miles (2.9 km).³ MSOAs are broadly controlled by population and therefore in places where catchment areas are smaller due to population density, this is reflected.

This is important because several local authorities have relatively high averages but, when broken down at a smaller geography, a much more heterogeneous experience depending on where a child goes to school.

For example, in Cambridge as a whole, 20 per cent of primary pupils attend underperforming schools, above the England average of 13 per cent. However, if you break this down to MSOA level, underperforming schools are almost entirely located in the East of Cambridge.

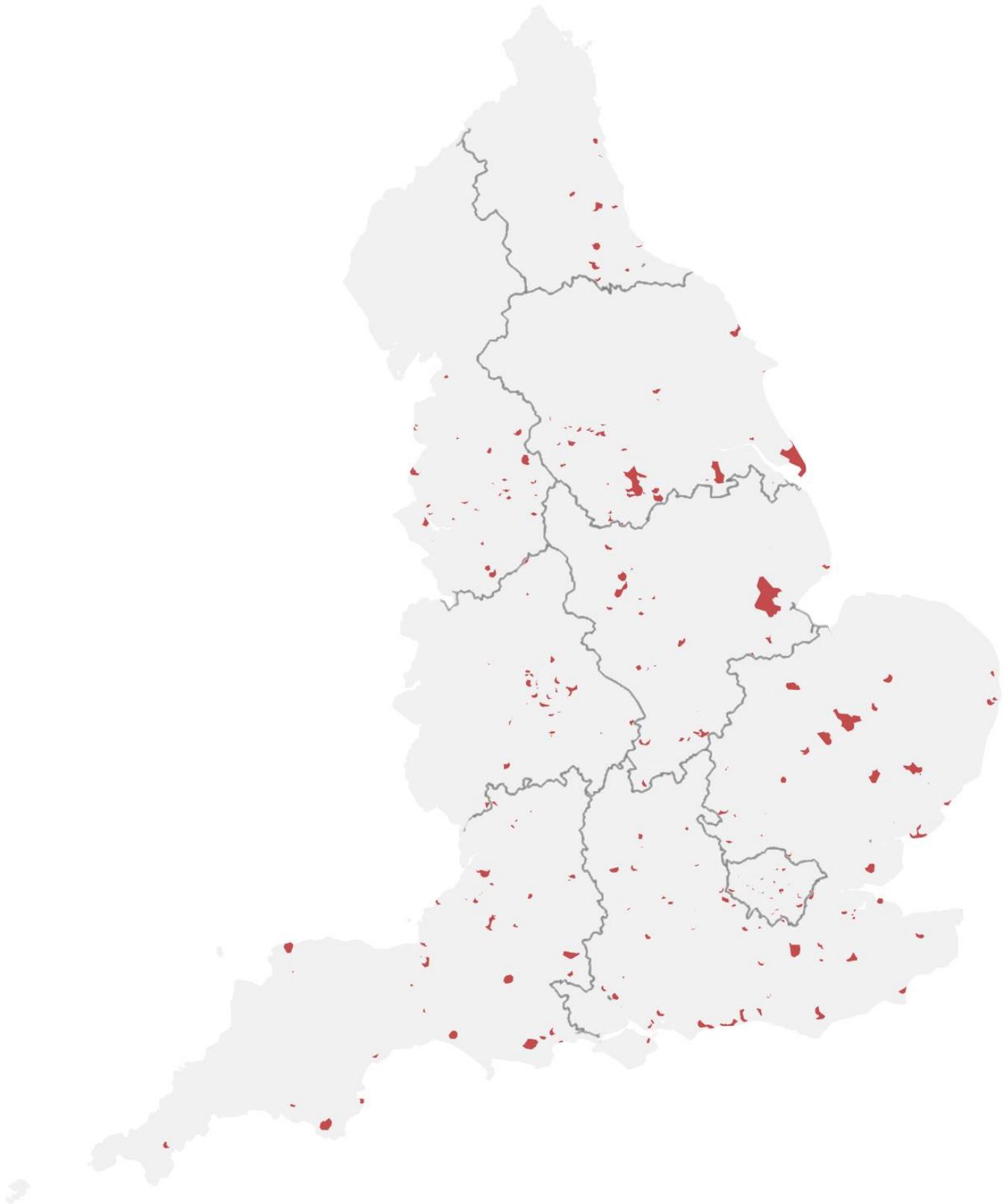
Figure 4: Share of pupils attending underperforming schools in Cambridge.



Extrapolating on this further, we can identify the areas which contain only underperforming schools. ⁴ There are 306 MSOAs in England which fall into this category. Using the latest (2018) population estimates this means there were 218,284 primary age children, or roughly 4 per cent of all primary age children, who lived in a local area with no good or outstanding schools within its boundaries.

Looking at the distribution of these “education deserts”, we can see they are fairly evenly distributed around England, although there are some clusters. Of the local authorities with high shares of MSOAs with no good or outstanding schools in them, Wellingborough, Arun, Ipswich, Cambridge and Scarborough have the largest share. At a regional level, such education deserts are most prevalent in the South West, where 6.4 per cent of MSOAs only contain underperforming schools. Yorkshire and the Humber has the second most at 5.7 per cent. London has the fewest with only 2.9 per cent of MSOAs falling into this category.

Figure 5: Map of MSOAs containing only underperforming primary schools.
Source: Ofsted Inspection Data 2019, Onward analysis



Secondary schools

We can conduct a similar exercise for secondary schools. This section analyses every mainstream state-funded secondary school by their Ofsted rating, at district and unitary local authority level.⁵

As you can see in Figure 6 below, there is a much clearer regional divide at secondary level, with the North of England suffering in particular. In total, 20 per cent of pupils attend underperforming secondary schools in England. But in the North East, 11 out of 12 local authorities have a higher than average share of pupils attending underperforming schools. In the North West, more than three quarters (77 per cent) of local authorities have a higher than average share of pupils attending underperforming schools.

This compares sharply to other parts of the country. Only one in seven (16 per cent) local authorities in London has an above average share, and less than one in five (19 per cent) local authorities in the South East do. The implication is that a secondary school pupil in the North of England is around five times more likely to live in an area with a high share of pupils in underperforming schools than a similar pupil in London or the South East. Significantly reducing their opportunities through higher competition for good school places (pushing up prices in good school catchment areas) and more limited routes to a good or outstanding education.

Figure 6: Percentage of pupils attending underperforming secondary schools.

Source: Ofsted Inspection Data 2019, Onward analysis

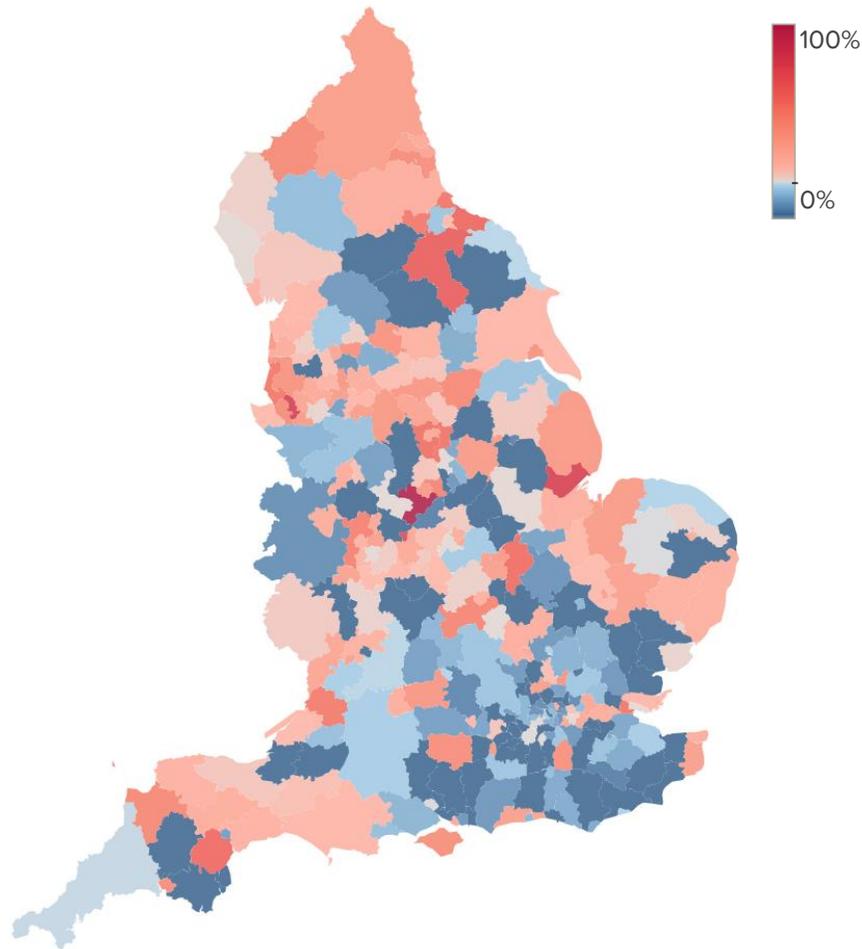


Figure 7: Percentage of local authorities with an above average share of pupils in underperforming schools by region.

Source: Ofsted Inspection Date 2019, Onward analysis

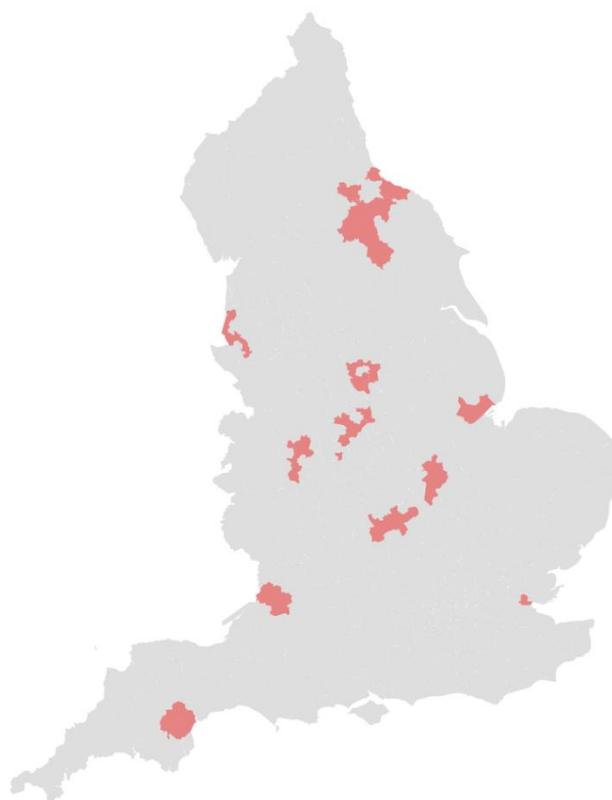


Looking at the local authorities with the largest share of pupils attending underperforming secondary schools reinforces this finding. Of the 20 local authorities with the most underperforming schools, a fifth of them are in the North East: Redcar and Cleveland, Darlington, Hambleton and Hartlepool. This means that not only does the vast majority of the North East have an above average share of pupils attending underperforming schools, but many of these places are among the worst performing in the whole of England.

Table 2 and Figure 8: Bottom 20 local authorities for share of pupils attending underperforming secondary schools.

Source: Ofsted Inspection Data 2019, Onward analysis

Rank	Local authority	Share of pupils
1	South Derbyshire	100%
2	Knowsley	82%
3	Boston	81%
4	Tamworth	75%
5	Hambleton	67%
6	Redcar and Cleveland	64%
7	Teignbridge	63%
8	East Northamptonshire	61%
9	North East Derbyshire	60%
10	Bolsover	59%
11	Castle Point	58%
12	Hartlepool	58%
13	Darlington	57%
14	Sefton	57%
15	South Gloucestershire	56%
16	South Staffordshire	53%
17	Erewash	52%
18	South Northamptonshire	51%
19	Torridge	50%
20	Doncaster	50%

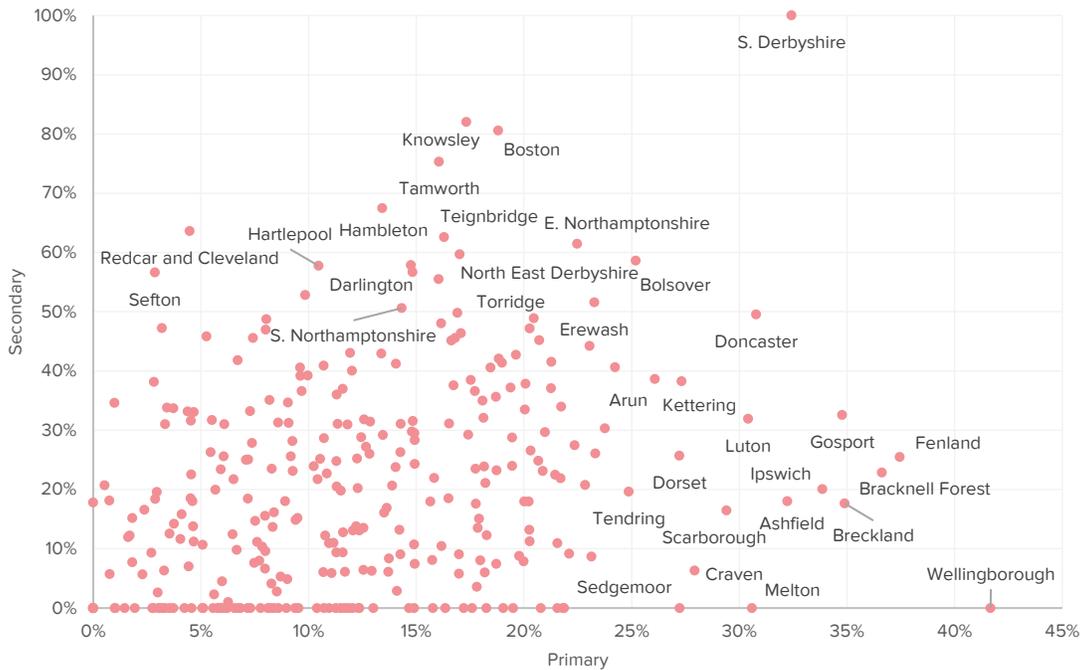


Note: This analysis is based on the most recent Ofsted inspections from 2019, there have been developments in recent years in some of these places, including the introduction of the Opportunity North East and the re-brokering of several schools to high performing MATs such as Northern Education Trust and Outwood Grange Trust.

This analysis also allows us to identify the places where there is an over representation of underperforming schools at both phases of education. The scatter plot below identifies the extent to which different places suffer from weak school quality at both primary and secondary level. We identify a number of “education deserts”, including South and North East Derbyshire, East Northamptonshire, Doncaster, Boston, Knowsley and Bolsover, where parents and students are being let down throughout the education system. In South Derbyshire, the worst performing area, pupils have a one in three chance of attending an underperforming primary school and a 100 per cent chance of attending an underperforming secondary school.

Figure 9: Share of pupils attending underperforming primary and secondary schools

Source: Ofsted Inspection Data 2019, Onward analysis



We use Ofsted rankings as the basis of our analysis as they represent a thorough representation of school governance and standards, taking into account progress and attainment as well as leadership and teaching quality. However Ofsted rankings naturally have limitations: they are infrequent, qualitative as well as quantitative, and many school leaders argue they do not always reflect the quality or results of a school.

Another way of considering this problem is by looking at variation in attainment. There are also shortcomings with this measure: it is a single annual metric, heavily influenced by prior attainment and socio-economic circumstances, and subject to criticism for the narrow way it defines learning achievement. But it nonetheless provides another perspective on the geographic variation in educational opportunity.

Looking at Key Stage 2 data by local authority below, we can see a strong concentration of weak performance in the East of England. The East of England has the lowest percentage of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, with a regional average of around 2 per cent below the England average.

In local authorities such as Great Yarmouth, Norwich, Breckland, Fenland, East Cambridgeshire and Tendring, half of pupils, on average, fail to meet the expected standard at the end of primary school. When considering these rates against the rest of England, the concentration of poor primary outcomes becomes particularly apparent.

When we consider secondary attainment using Key Stage 4 data we are met with a more complex picture. Echoing Ofsted ratings, we find that, at regional level, the North East has the lowest average share of pupils achieving 9 to 4 grades in English and maths GCSEs.

However if you break this down to local authority level, we see that only one North East local authority - Middlesbrough - scores amongst the most underperforming 50 local authorities in England by this measure. This suggests there is a sustained low performance across the region, caused by weak overall school standards, rather than specific acute areas of underperformance. Opportunity North East, established to address the significant challenges across the region rather than in one local authority, supports this hypothesis.⁶

Figure 10: Average percentage of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths by local authority.

Source: DfE, Get Information About Schools, 2018/2019, Onward analysis

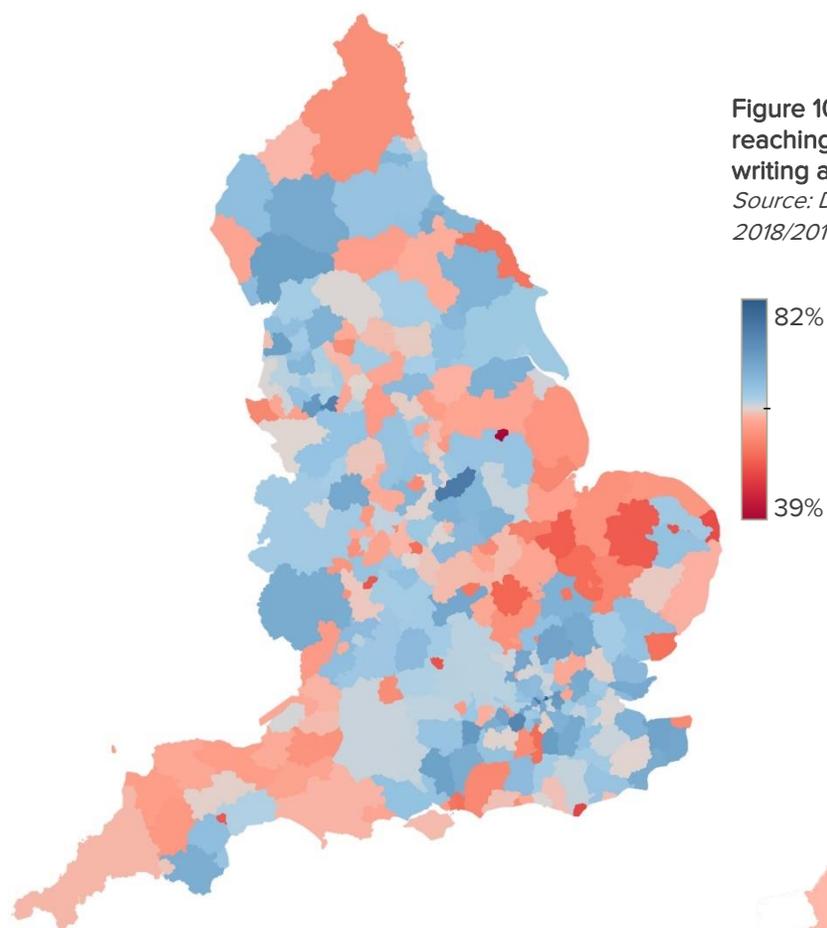
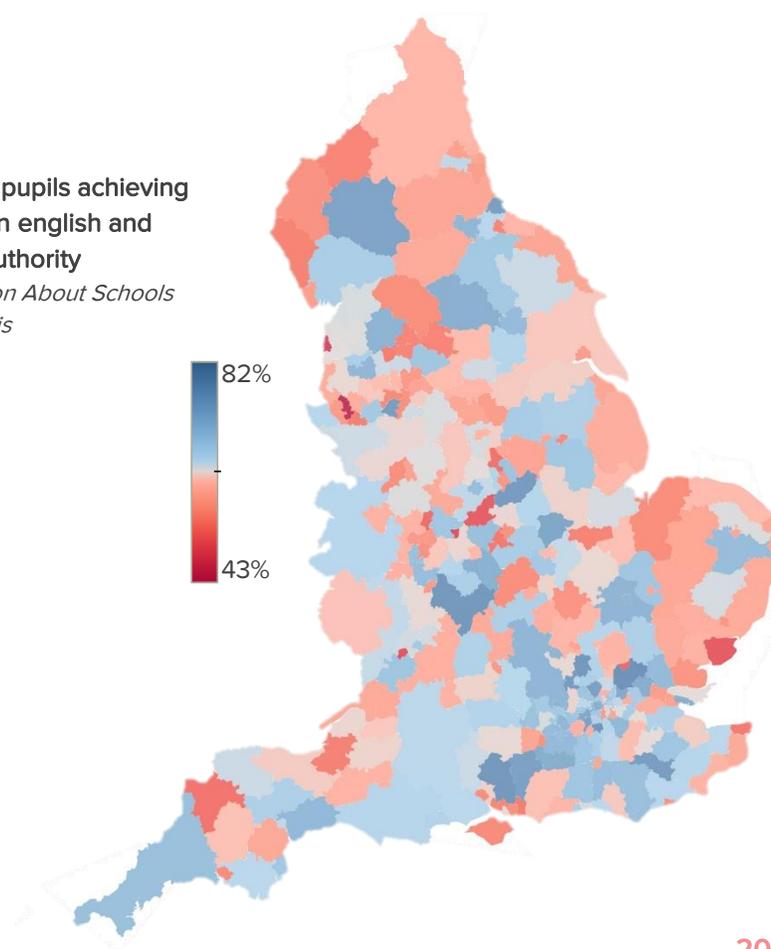


Figure 11: Percentage of pupils achieving standard 9 to 4 passes in english and maths GCSEs by local authority

Source: DfE, Get Information About Schools 2018/2019, Onward analysis



It is notable that the North East emerges from this analysis as one of the best places to go to primary school but the worst place in England to go to secondary school. There are competing theories as to why this is. Some studies suggest primary schools in the North East are better equipped to support disadvantaged pupils than secondary schools in the region. Others have suggested that primary schools in the North East do not teach their pupils to learn independently, which leads to poorer attainment later on.⁷ But neither of these theories appear particularly convincing. More likely is that weak institutional quality at secondary school, with few if any of the successful schools which played an important partnership role as teaching schools during London Challenge, has created a cycle of underperformance rather than improvement.

This problem is not unique to the North East. Allerdale, Maldon, Lambeth, Barrow-in-Furness, Hartlepool and Teignbridge are all in the top quartile of local authorities by share of pupils reaching the expected standard at Key Stage 2 and the bottom quartile for share of pupils reaching 9 to 4 in English and maths GCSEs. Meanwhile Knowsley, Blackpool and Enfield all saw the largest percentage drop in pupils reaching the expected standard and those that achieve 9 to 4 in English and maths GCSE.

This suggests that there are a number of local authorities where schools are not only much more likely to be ranked inadequate or requiring improvement by Ofsted, but where attainment is below expected standards throughout the education system or drops off sharply between primary and secondary. In these places, it would be reasonable to expect the Government to intervene to a greater extent but not all of these areas are covered by existing Opportunity Areas or Whitehall interventions.

How has attainment changed over time?

We also consider the places in England that have either had sustained low performance for some time, or places which have seen attainment drop considerably over the last two decades, by considering GCSE results over time. Because of the changes to how grades are measured, we combine two datasets: from 1997 to 2016, 'proportion of pupils achieving 5 or more A*-C grades including English and maths', and, from 2017-19, 'proportion of pupils achieving 9 - 4 in English and maths'.

Analysis reveals what is by now a familiar picture. Among the county and unitary authorities who ranked the lowest in 1998 and have seen little movement up the rankings since, we identify Nottingham, Knowsley, North East Lincolnshire, Kingston upon Hull, Hartlepool and Middlesbrough. These places have ranked in the bottom decile for GCSE results for over two decades, with little evidence of improvement.

We also look at the places that once performed reasonably well but have seen attainment fall substantially. Taking a three year average of 1998-2000 and 2017-2019 to reduce the risk of individual years distorting the results, we find that Dorset dropped 82 places, going from the 36th best local authority by GCSE attainment in England to 118th over the period. This was followed by Derbyshire, which dropped 74 places from 40th to 124th. It is notable that on current Ofsted rankings, these local authorities have

some of the lowest levels of access to good or outstanding schools in the country, particularly at primary level. We also find that the South West struggles particularly. Plymouth, Cornwall and Somerset all fall at least 50 places by average rank. Meanwhile Torbay, Swindon and South Gloucestershire also fall more than 20 places.

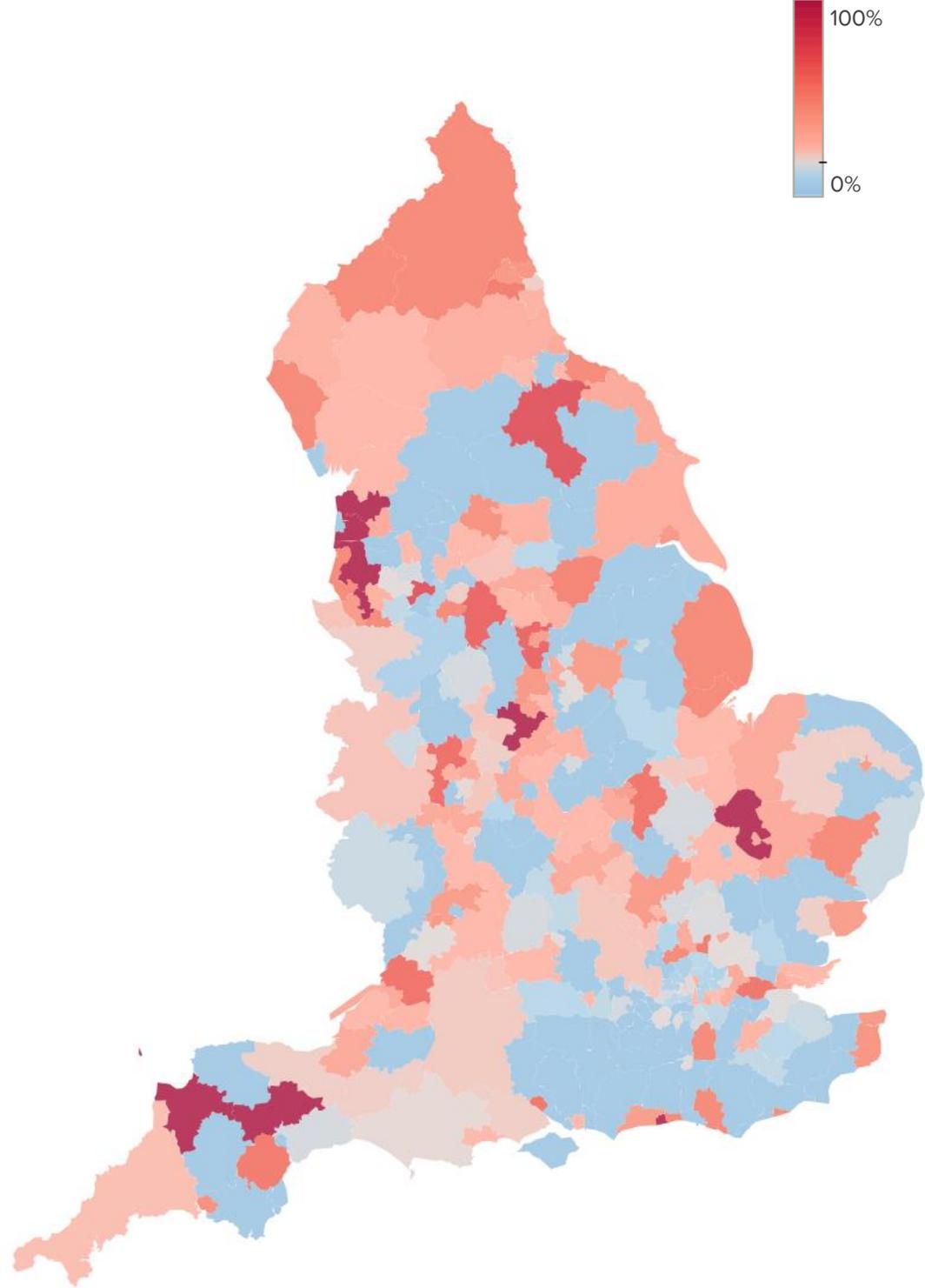
Availability of post-16 education

Considering access to post-16 education is a more complicated picture, due to the various institutions young people can attend, ranging from sixth form colleges which offer A Level and BTEC qualifications, to employer-led technical education which is typically more vocational. Looking at mainstream state-funded education from 16 to 19, including community schools, voluntary aided schools, voluntary controlled schools, foundation schools, academies, free schools, city technology colleges education and further education colleges, we find that underperforming institutions are disproportionately located outside of London and the South East.

On average, 21 per cent of mainstream 16-to-19 education institutions are rated underperforming. Considering the local authorities where over a fifth of schools are rated underperforming, it is clear that 16 year olds in the North in particular lack adequate choice as to where to attend school. In total, 83 per cent of local authorities in the North East fall into this category, 57 per cent in Yorkshire and the Humber, 54 per cent in the East Midlands and 51 per cent in the North West. The local authorities that have little to no good or outstanding mainstream colleges typically perform poorly at secondary level too. For example, East Cambridgeshire, Fylde, Knowsley and South Derbyshire have some of the poorest access to good colleges in England as well as the weakest secondary school provision.

Figure 12: Share of underperforming post-16 mainstream education institutions

Source: Ofsted Inspection Data 2019, Onward analysis



Pupils studying in London are also considerably more likely to achieve at least two or more substantial Level 3 qualifications, such as A Levels, an extended project, applied general or technical qualifications attained in a mainstream school. In fact, 12 of the top 20 county and unitary authorities for their share of students achieving two or more Level 3 qualifications are in London.

The poorest performing places are not particularly concentrated in any region in England. Knowsley once again scores the poorest, followed by North Lincolnshire, Southampton, Swindon and Middlesbrough. This may be because of relatively small sample sizes: there is only one 16-19 education institution in Knowsley, for example, and data suggests only 22 pupils entered for any qualification in the most recent year. This may be why, in the most recent data (2017/18), Knowsley had the third lowest percentage of pupils continuing into sustained mainstream education after Key Stage 4 (78 per cent), second only to Salford at 77 per cent and the Isles of Scilly (68 per cent).

Looking further to see the wider picture of where progression to mainstream sustained education is lowest, we find that you are 8 per cent more likely to progress to sustained education after Key Stage 4 if you live in London compared to the North East. Given one of the strongest determinants for future earnings is their education level, this has profound implications for social mobility and prospective earnings. A number of places with weak 16-19 education benefit from greater uptake of apprenticeships, however broadly speaking it does not appear that low uptake of sustained education is explained by high uptake of sustained apprenticeships.

Figure 13: Percentage of pupils achieving two or more substantial Level 3 qualifications

Source: DfE, 16 to 19 results. Local Authority and regional level tables: state-funded schools and colleges 2018/2019, Onward analysis

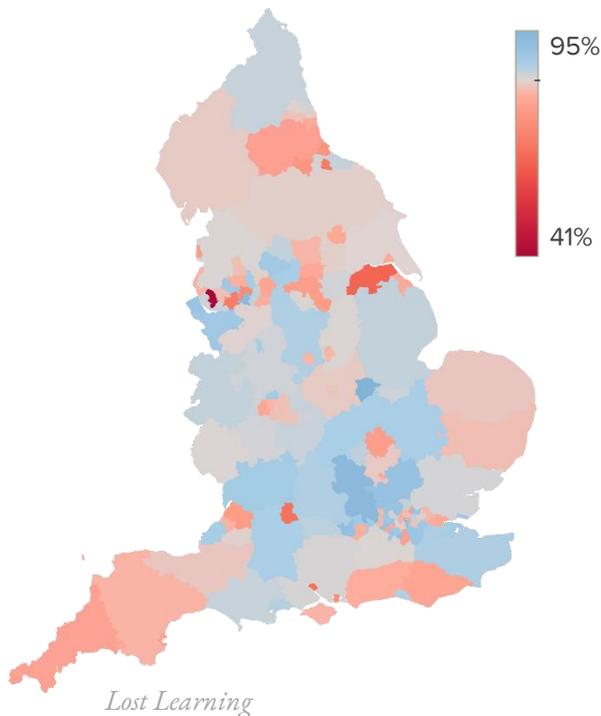
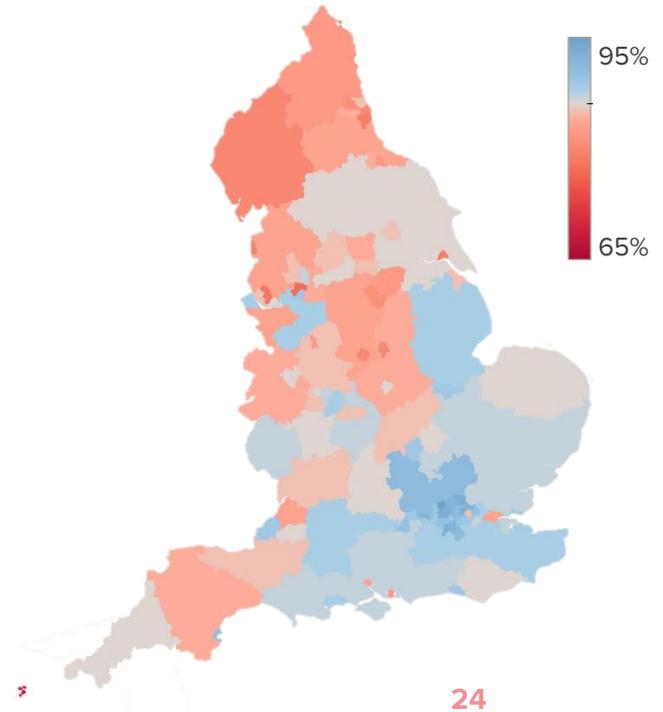


Figure 14: Percentage of pupils that continue into sustained mainstream education after completing Key Stage 4.

Source: DfE, Key stage 4 destination measures 2017/2018, Onward analysis



Conclusion

This analysis suggests that, whichever way you look at it, there are parts of England where parents and children simply have much less opportunity to benefit from a good or outstanding school, and where educational underperformance has become entrenched. These areas are not clustered within a single region of the country and the North/South divide is not as clear as some have argued, but there is a clear geographic disparity between different places.

What is clear is that the areas with weak educational opportunity are also places which frequently appear on levelling up indices and other measures of disadvantage. They include coastal areas like Tendring, Scarborough and Arun, but also more urban places like the outskirts of Liverpool, Knowsley and Doncaster. At a regional level, we can see that the South West, East Midlands and Yorkshire have the lowest opportunity at primary level, while the North East stands out at secondary.

If the Government is serious about levelling up, and improving opportunity for people wherever they live, there are few better ways they could tackle it than address these engrained divides.

Drivers

What characterises underperforming schools?



This report has so far examined the differences in school quality and attainment between different places, and established considerable variation in parents' and pupils' ability to benefit from good schooling. This chapter goes further, exploring the characteristics that tend to define underperforming schools in an effort to understand the relationship between school improvement and wider social and economic factors.

Income deprivation

It is well documented that children from disadvantaged backgrounds perform less well in school and are considerably less likely to pursue further education.⁸ Similarly, education level is one of the strongest determinants of future earnings for an individual, especially at tertiary education level. But what about at school level - are the best schools typically in areas that need them most, with the greatest deprivation, or in areas of relative affluence?

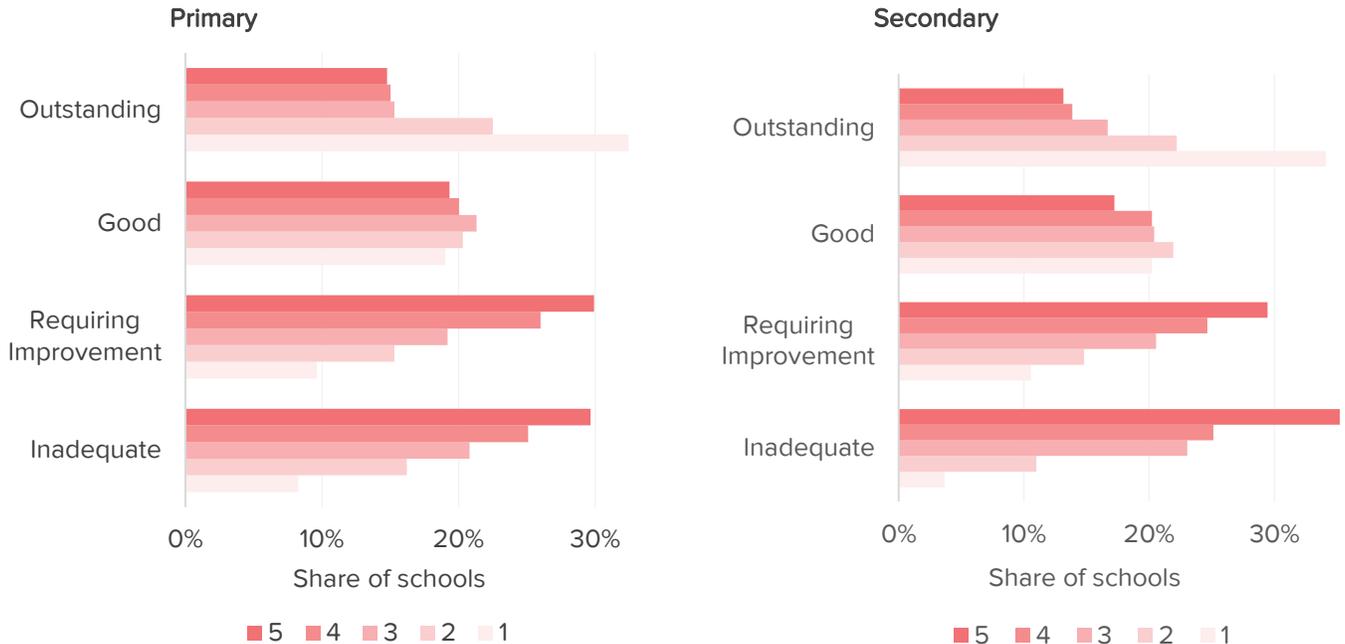
In this section we analyse the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), which determines deprivation based on the proportion of children aged 0-15 who live in income deprived households within their LSOA (with 1 as the least deprived and 5 as the most), to explore the relationship between school ranking (using Ofsted grades) and deprivation.

The results show that, at primary level, inadequate schools are almost four times more likely to be in the most deprived category than outstanding schools. Good schools, on the other hand, are about as likely to be in the most deprived category as they are the least deprived.

Secondary schools present a stronger relationship between deprivation and performance. Inadequate secondary schools are 10 times more likely to be rated in the most deprived category than least deprived. Only 3.7 per cent of inadequate secondary schools were in the least deprived category, compared to 34.1 per cent of outstanding schools.

Figure 15: Distribution of Ofsted rated schools by deprivation

Source: Ofsted Inspection Data 2019, Onward analysis



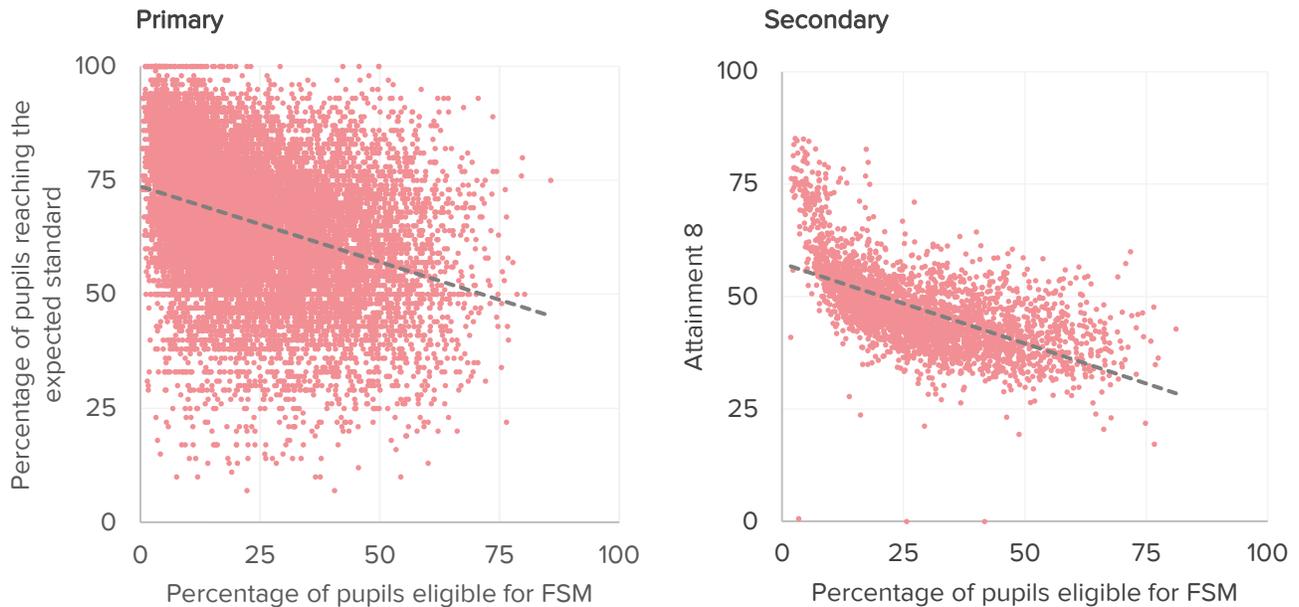
Although Ofsted ratings incorporate several factors, this may in part reflect a causal relationship between deprivation and attainment. Research has shown that disadvantaged children typically achieve lower attainment, compounded by a variety of complex reasons which start at the beginning of a child’s life. For example, at just 14 months old children from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to use more gesturing, which ultimately feeds into better use of vocabulary. Meanwhile, at the end of Year 1 children entitled to free school meals are considerably less likely to reach the expected standard of phonics, suggesting that this gap in attainment predates a child’s entrance into mainstream schooling.⁹

Another way to measure deprivation is to look at the percentage of children eligible for free school meals. This is a closer measure of the deprivation of the children that attend the specific school, rather than the income deprivation of the families in the vicinity. As a result, it offers a potentially more accurate reflection of the socio-economic make-up of English schools. However it also has its limitations: not all those potentially eligible for free school meals are registered as such and it is also a binary indicator, unlike the IDACI it does not offer a sliding scale from the most or least deprived, for example.¹⁰

Figure 16 below plots every primary and secondary school by the share of pupils on free school meals against the percentage of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading writing and maths at the end of Key Stage 2 and, on the right hand side, Attainment 8 scores at Key Stage 4. We find that where schools have a high proportion of pupils on free school meals, their overall attainment scores tend to be lower, particularly at secondary level.

Figure 16: Attainment against percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals.

Source: DfE, *Get Information About Schools 2018/2019, Onward analysis*

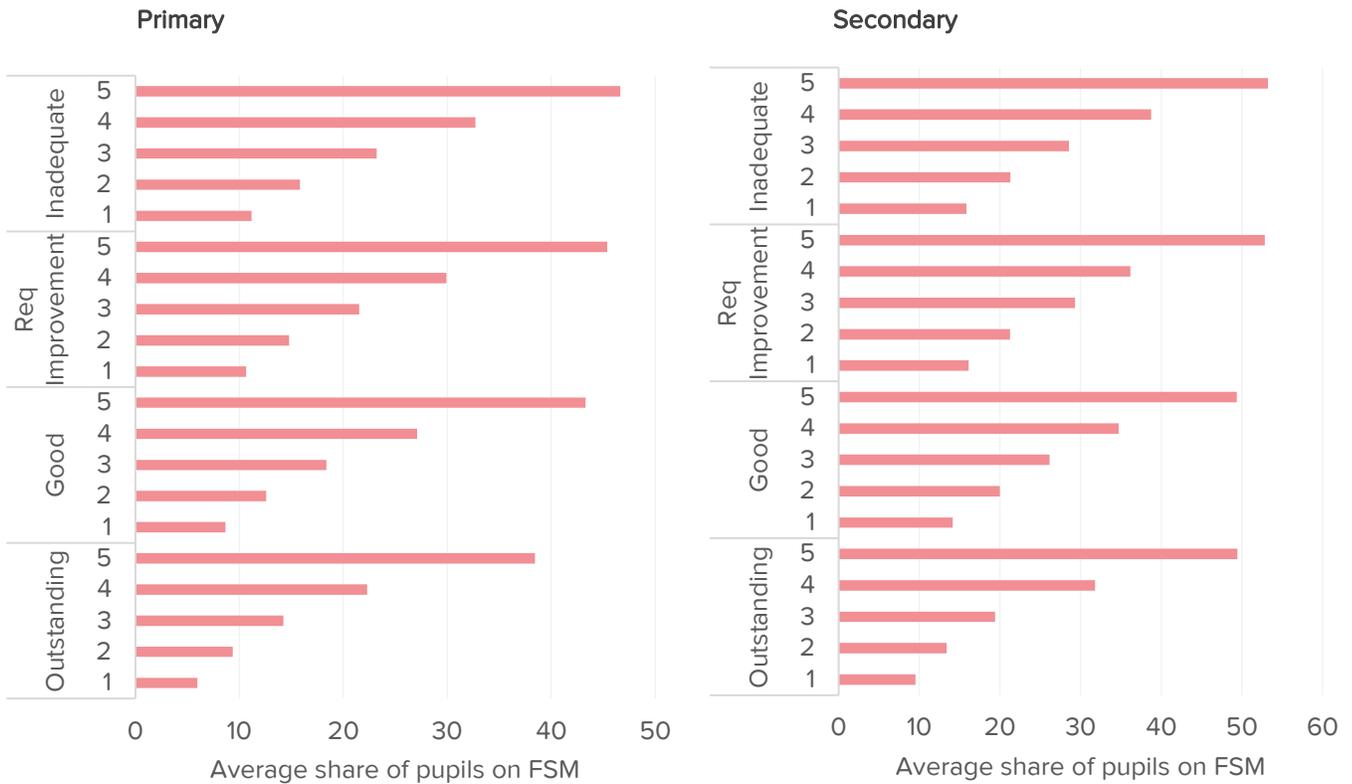


The implication is that the best schools - either by Ofsted ranking or by attainment - are focused increasingly on the pupils least in need of good education. This may be partly due to the higher propensity for good and outstanding schools to be located in more affluent areas, leading to less disadvantaged intakes. But it may also be due to good and outstanding schools being less willing to take more difficult pupils and using catchment areas, intake requirements and exclusions to improve their inspection and examination outcomes.

We can test this by separating all schools into their Ofsted ranking and then examining the percentage of pupils on free school meals by the IDACI of the school. As we show in Figure 16 below, this reveals that in the most income deprived neighbourhoods (those ranked as 5 in the IDACI) outstanding schools still have a lower share of pupils on free school meals. When comparing deprived and the most deprived schools, underperforming schools take on an average of 6 per cent (at Primary) and 4 per cent (at Secondary) more disadvantaged pupils than Good or outstanding schools. In other words, when similarly income deprived communities are compared, where you would suspect the rate of pupils eligible for free school meals to be relatively similar, outstanding schools still take a below average share of disadvantaged pupils.

Figure 17: Average share of pupils eligible for FSM by IDACI and Ofsted rating.

Source: Ofsted Inspection Data, DfE Get Information About Schools 2018/2019, Onward analysis



The relationship between school quality and urbanity

Income deprivation can often be closely related to the urbanity or rurality of a place. By looking at the urban/rural classification of where schools are located, we can understand whether urbanity is related to where good and outstanding schools are most likely to be.

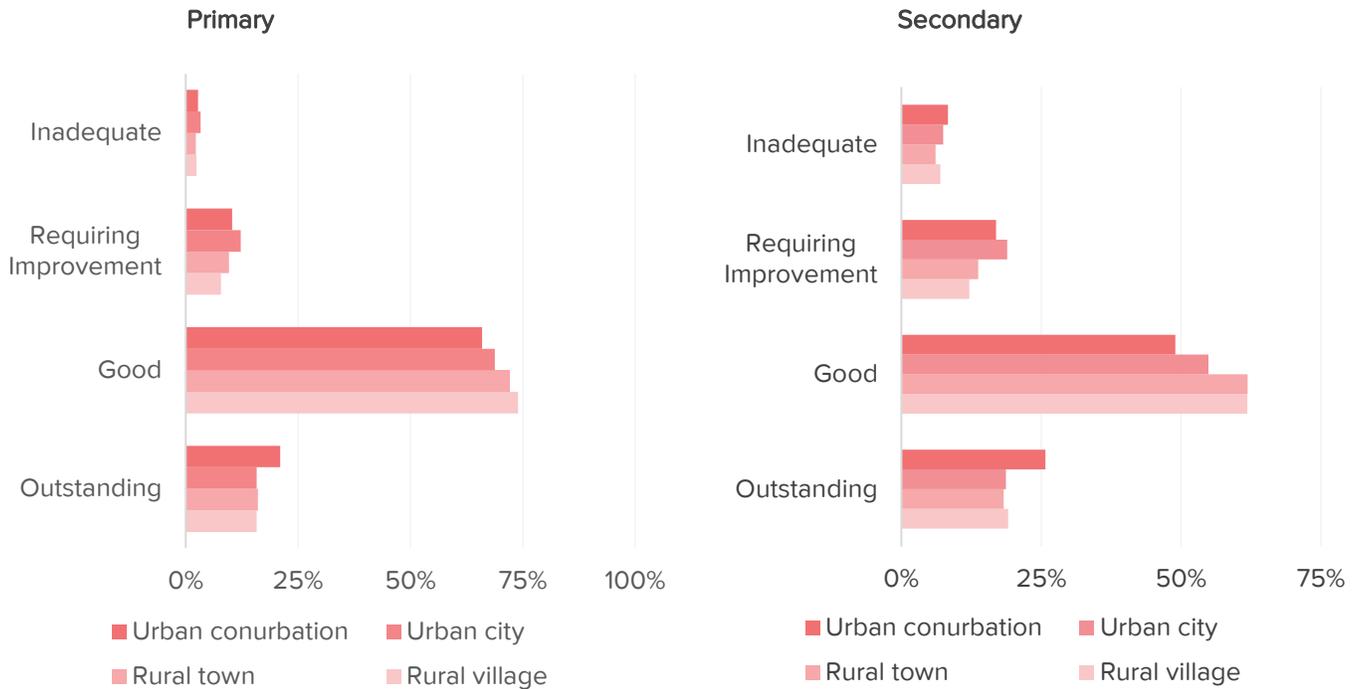
Our analysis suggests that children who live in densely populated urban conurbations such as London, Sheffield, Manchester or Birmingham, are both more likely to attend an outstanding school (Primary = 21 per cent, Secondary = 26 per cent,) and more likely to attend an Inadequate school (Primary = 3 per cent, Secondary = 8 per cent) than their peers living in less built up areas, where the percentage of outstanding schools is 16 per cent and 19 per cent respectively.¹¹ Some of this is particularly driven by the prevalence of good and outstanding schools in London specifically. If you remove London schools, urban conurbation schools are slightly less likely to be outstanding (Primary = 18 per cent, Secondary = 19 per cent), nonetheless the relationship still stands.

This polarity is likely to be driven by the socio-economic and demographic make up of urban conurbations. Cities are often characterised by higher than average levels of

deprivation (65 per cent of primary schools in urban conurbations are classed as 4 or 5 by the IDACI), whilst also being home to the most wealthy and educated in society. In addition, as found during London Challenge, higher levels of ethnic minority pupils in cities may serve to increase attainment scores.

Figure 18: Distribution of Ofsted rated schools across urban/rural classifications

Source: Ofsted Inspection Data 2019, 2011 Rural-Urban Classification of Local Authority Districts and Similar Geographic Units in England, Onward analysis



The role of school size in delivering better outcomes

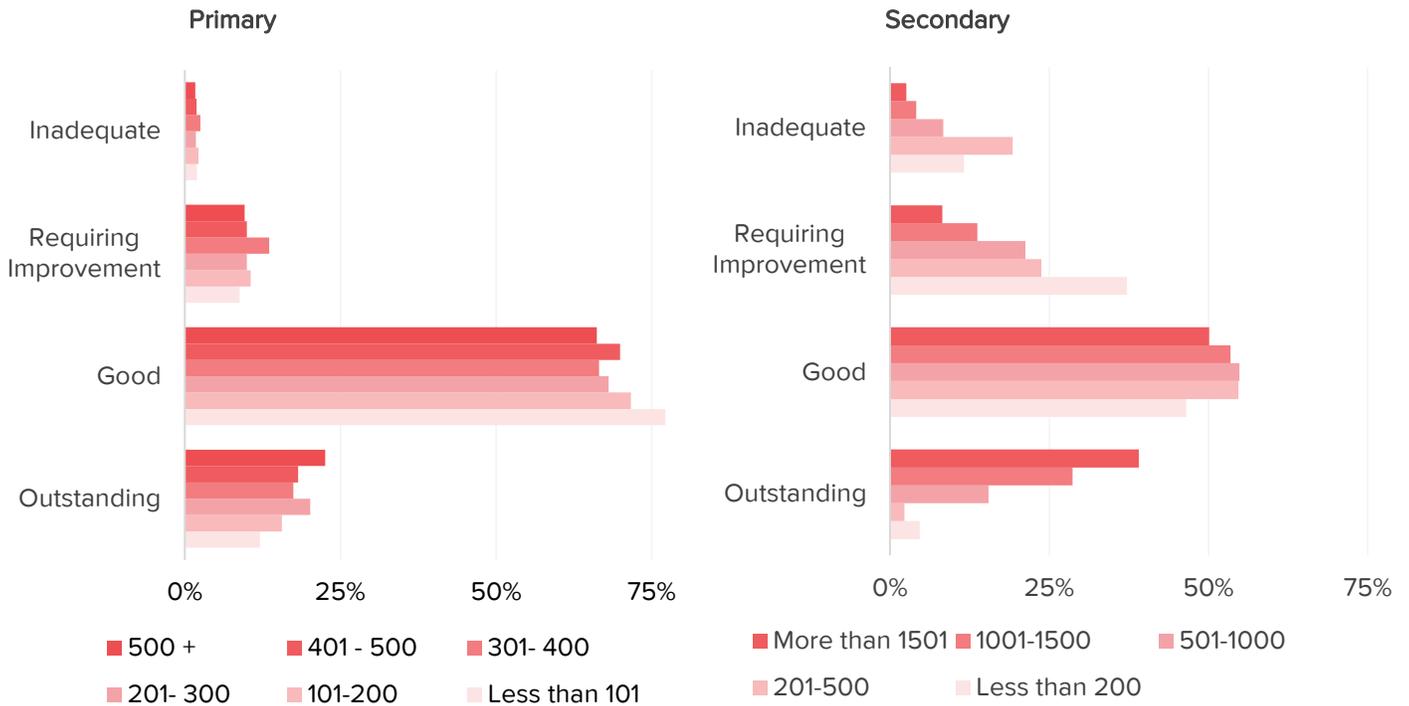
There is also a lively debate about the role of school size in educational outcomes. This section explores the relationship between school size and quality.

Looking at school sizes, we find that larger schools tend to perform considerably better than those with fewer pupils. This is likely to be compounded by the fact that when a school is underperforming pupils are likely to leave to go to a better school, thereby causing the school to artificially reduce in size.

At primary level, 23 per cent of schools with over 500 pupils are rated as outstanding, almost double (12 per cent) that of the smallest schools, with less than 101 pupils. At secondary level this trend is even more pronounced, whereby 39 per cent of schools with over 1501 pupils were rated as outstanding, this jumps to 54 per cent if you look at schools with over 2000 pupils, although the sample size is smaller.

Figure 19: Ofsted rated schools by number of pupils.

Source: Ofsted Inspection Data 2019, Onward analysis



The trend of larger schools performing better overlaps with looking at the urbanity of schools, as the vast majority of the largest schools are in urban conurbations, which are also most likely to be outstanding. It is possible that this trend reflects the location of the school, as we have discussed, as much as it does the size of the school. In 2019, Onward research found that village schools are often high performing: only 8 per cent are not good or outstanding, compared to 11 per cent nationally and 15 per cent in towns and small cities, and the very smallest schools are most likely to be good or outstanding.¹² The implication may be that large schools tend to be more effective in cities but in rural areas, smaller village schools may be more effective.

The importance of teachers

In this section we explore the extent to which teacher availability and quality has a bearing on school quality, and show that at both primary and secondary level, teacher supply issues tend to be worse in the regions that we have identified as having a larger share of underperforming schools. Indeed, the National Foundation of Educational Research has suggested that the rate of teachers leaving the profession and moving school is highest when the school has been rated as being Inadequate in successive inspections.¹³

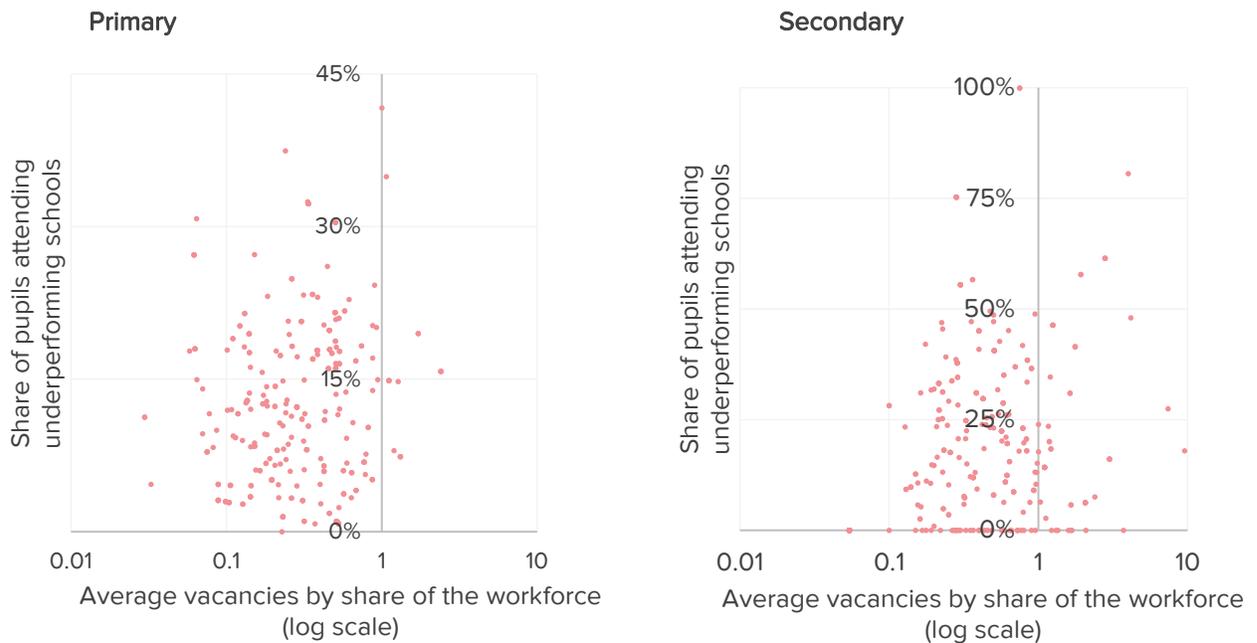
We find that underperforming schools tend to have more teacher supply issues than schools performing well in Ofsted ratings, as indicated by higher vacancy rates. It is unclear whether poor ratings lead to supply issues, or vice versa. At primary level, the

East of England records the most vacancies, averaging at 0.3% of the workforce, followed by the South West at 0.23%, followed by London. At secondary level, the North East has the most vacancies with 0.8%, double the England average, followed by the East Midlands at 0.63%.

Whilst the regions that struggle most with underperforming schools also tend to have higher vacancies, breaking this down to local authority level reveals that it is not the local authorities with higher numbers of underperforming schools that necessarily have high vacancy rates. This implies, albeit inconclusively, that it is not the undersupply of teachers driving underperformance but instead a lack of teachers best placed to make a real difference.

Figure 20: Share of pupils in underperforming schools against average vacancies by share of the workforce, at local authority level.

Source: School Workforce Census, 2019, Onward analysis

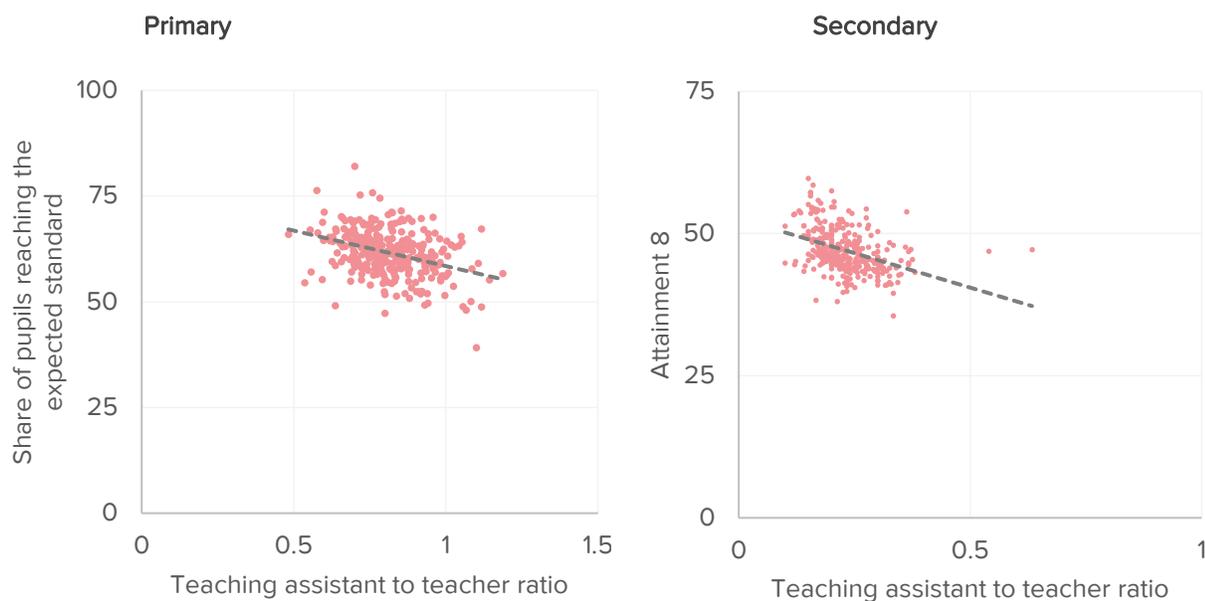


This is borne out by the fact that the regions and local authorities with the highest share of underperforming schools tend to have less effective leadership and management, as rated by Ofsted. Regionally, Yorkshire and the Humber and the East Midlands have the weakest quality of leadership. At primary level, taking an average score of the 1 to 4 leadership rating (1 being outstanding and 4 being requiring improvement), the poorest performing local authorities for school leadership are: Wyre Forest, Doncaster and Sedgemoor. Other local authorities already identified, for example South Derbyshire, Wellingborough, Fenland and Bolsover also score particularly poorly. At secondary level, the North of England fares poorest, specifically Redcar and Cleveland, Bolsover and Hartlepool. Other areas that have weak school leadership include parts of Derbyshire, Barnsley, East Northamptonshire and Knowsley.

Our analysis also suggests that places with high levels of school underperformance also tend to have higher ratios of teaching assistants to all teachers. Regionally, Yorkshire and the Humber and the North West have the highest ratios at primary level both with 0.83, relative to a national average of 0.78. Yorkshire and the Humber has the highest ratio at secondary level at 0.26, followed by the North East at 0.25. This is likely to be driven by low attainment in schools with a high rate of teaching assistants, as is shown in Figure 19.

Figure 21: Attainment versus Teaching Assistant ratio by local authority

Source: DfE, Get Information About Schools, 2018/2019, School Workforce Census, Onward analysis

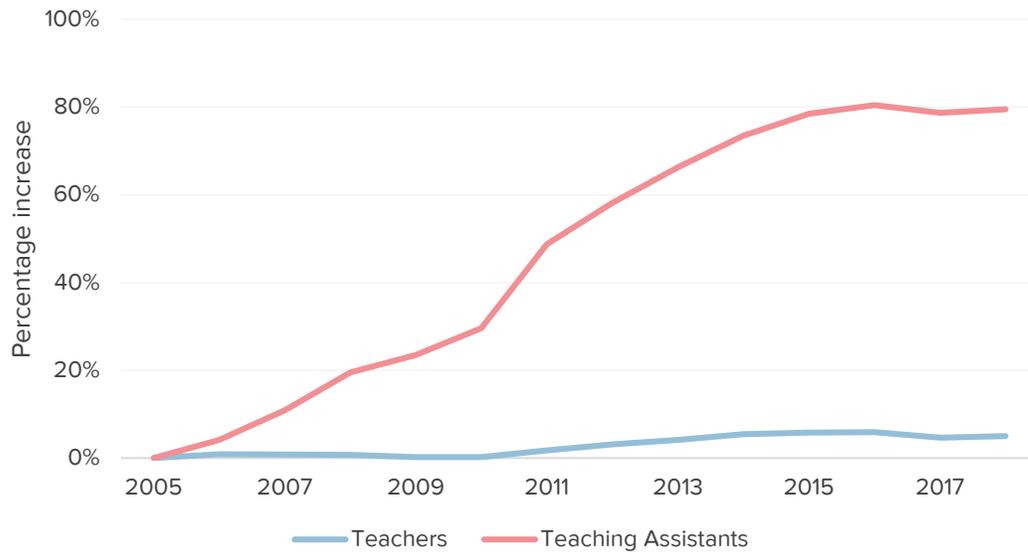


This suggests that school underperformance may not be solely an issue of vacancies and supply but also one of quality, and the substitution of quality teaching with less-qualified teaching assistants. There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that teaching assistants do not markedly improve the quality of education and can actively harm children’s outcomes. The Education Endowment Foundation’s toolkit supports the idea that teaching assistants rarely lead to better outcomes.¹⁴

This is despite a considerable rise in the number of teaching assistants in recent years, equivalent to an 80 per cent increase in the last fifteen years. As shown in Figure 22, there is now almost one teaching assistant to every two teachers in state-funded schools, whilst the number of qualified teachers has remained fairly stable. Whilst data is not available for how much taxpayer money has been spent on teaching assistants specifically, £4.3 billion was spent on education support staff, which includes teaching assistants, in 2018/19.¹⁵ According to the EPI, as of 2016, spending per pupil on education support staff has risen 138 per cent since 2002, compared to regular teaching staff where there has only been a 17 per cent increase.¹⁶

Figure 22: Rise in regular teachers and teaching assistants since 2005.

Source: School Workforce Census, 2019, Onward analysis



Learning lessons

The history of school improvement



Successive governments have tried to turn around local underperformance in education. Margaret Thatcher introduced City Technology Colleges. Tony Blair's "education, education, education" mantra materialised into city academies and the London Challenge. David Cameron's Government ushered in Free Schools, expanded academisation and regional schools commissioners. Theresa May pledged to address the vast injustices of weak school standards and expand good school places through grammar, faith and university led schools.

The result has been progress in some areas but a stubborn lack of it in others. Record numbers of children now receive a high quality education: 86 per cent of all schools are rated as good or outstanding, up from 68 per cent in 2010.¹⁷ The gap between the most disadvantaged pupils and their peers narrowed in the decade leading up to 2020: in primary schools disadvantaged children were 10.6 months behind in 2010 using a KS2 scaled score in reading and maths which fell to 9.3 months behind in 2019. In secondary schools the GCSE maths and english gap narrowed from 19.7 months to 18.1 months over the same period.¹⁸

However these national markers of success obscure signs of continued underperformance in specific places. The attainment gap varies widely across the country - and is nearly 50 per cent wider in local authorities like Blackpool and Knowsley (26.3 months) than the England average. There is considerable evidence that some forms of progress have not only stalled, but reversed.¹⁹ Even before the pandemic took hold, the secondary attainment gap had shrunk to 18.1 months, the same as it was five years ago.²⁰ Similarly, the share of good or outstanding schools has not increased in the last three years.²¹

Adding to this is the impact of the pandemic, where school closures have had a catastrophic impact on children's learning. The true repercussions of this will be seen in the years to come, however it is estimated that primary school children are approximately two months behind where they should be in reading and maths.²² Most analysis also confirms that these effects have disproportionately affected disadvantaged pupils - due in part to a lack of online learning resources.

If the Government is serious about levelling up, it must consider education - and in particular the fact that children in some parts of England have little or no ability to attend a good or outstanding school, irrespective of their natural abilities or how hard they work. In these places, talent is constrained by lack of opportunity, levelling down their prospects and the long-term prosperity of England as a whole.

The history of place-based school improvement

There have been a number of place-based education interventions in England in recent decades, but little consensus on what has worked and why. This section explores the evidence of different interventions.

London Challenge

The most famous place-based initiative in recent history is London Challenge. Launched in 2003 as a five-year programme, it was subsequently extended until 2011. The programme aimed to create a “step change” in the performance of secondary schools in the capital through a combination of tailored support for schools from advisers and school improvement partners, extended school provision and teacher and leadership training.

During its eight years of operation, school quality improved dramatically. Secondary schools in London went from the worst to among the best in the country: by 2011, only 2.4 per cent of London’s secondary schools were judged by Ofsted to be inadequate (versus 4.1 per cent nationally) and only four London secondary schools (about 1 per cent) remained below the floor target of attainment.²³ Meanwhile London’s attainment gap between pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and those who are not has remained the smallest in England since London Challenge’s introduction.²⁴

But the extent to which London Challenge was responsible for this turnaround, and its applicability elsewhere, is contested. Existing literature suggests that a range of factors, including primary attainment and the changing socioeconomic makeup of Inner London made a material contribution to the improvement in secondary outcomes, even if London Challenge’s consistent and committed approach helped to both accelerate and maintain those improvements.

Academics who credit London Challenge as the primary driver of success argue that it benefited from a number of advantages over other education policies. Kidson and Norris for example argue that London Challenge successfully blended strong direction from Whitehall, in the form of the new Minister for London Schools, Stephen Twigg, and Number 10, with on the ground expertise, in the form of local authorities and schools themselves, known as ‘Keys to Success’.²⁵²⁶ Separate studies have attributed improvement to the meticulous use of data to successfully diagnose what was going wrong in London schools and adapt over time.²⁷ Other studies point to the key worker living scheme to make living in London more affordable, the Chartered London Teacher scheme which improved teacher retention, the Advanced Skills Teachers who were deployed to underperforming schools, and the creation of better leaders, through the London Leadership Centre and Leadership Incentive Grant, among a range of other initiatives.²⁸

Yet while there is broad consensus that London Challenge left behind a stronger workforce that was better able to respond to the needs of disadvantaged pupils in particular, numerous other studies argue that demographic and cultural changes are responsible for much of the improvement. In particular, Bristol’s Simon Burgess has

suggested that London's greater proportion of ethnic minority pupils, who typically work harder and get better results than white British pupils, were influential.²⁹ At the time of his writing, white British pupils made up 36 per cent of pupils in London and 84 per cent in the rest of England. He suggests: "if London had the same ethnic composition as the rest of England, there would be no 'London Effect'."³⁰ The supporting analysis finds that when controlling for ethnicity, the 'London Effect' of pupil progress falls from 9.8 per cent to -1.4 per cent.

This argument has itself proven controversial. Tim Brighouse, former Commissioner of London Schools, and Baars et al from the Centre for London, have argued that educational outcomes improved across all major ethnic groups, rather than just those who typically have high attainment. They add that at local authority level there is no visible link between the level of ethnic diversity and educational performance, suggesting this is not what drove the improvements.³¹ Meanwhile, Greaves, Macmillan and Sibieta for the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission have instead pointed to prior attainment at primary level to explain the improvement in secondary attainment.³²

The implication is that children in London were already on the right track before London Challenge. It is not clear why this might have been, but the authors suggest that the National Literacy and Numeracy strategies, launched in 1998 and piloted in London, could have had an effect. Their analysis supports this suggestion, finding that once you have controlled for both prior attainment and pupil characteristics, the attainment gap between London secondary schools and the national average in 2012 falls from 21 per cent to 5 per cent.³³ It is also true that the programme coincided with a number of other policies, including Teach First and the academisation of maintained schools.³⁴

Ultimately the tailored nature of London Challenge and its coincidence with considerable demographic changes in London frustrate attempts to identify what works in school improvement, and how those methods could be replicated elsewhere. But the simple fact that London secondary schools went from the worst to among the best in England within a decade at least demonstrates that radical school improvement is possible.

City Challenge

City Challenge was launched as a successor to London Challenge in 2008, with a view to improving educational outcomes in Greater Manchester and the Black Country.³⁵ It sought to do so by applying the same principles of London Challenge, including adopting a collaborative approach that emphasised the development of inter-school partnerships and local authority buy-in.³⁶

Unlike in London, however, the programme delivered little progress. While the share of good and outstanding schools did increase in both areas, so did the share of inadequate schools in the Black Country.³⁷ The share of secondary schools below the desired attainment target fell somewhat in Greater Manchester to 6 per cent and 15 per cent of schools in the Black Country failed to meet the standard.³⁸

The Department blamed the short intervention period for the limited success. According to an official evaluation, “a longer period of time would have been helpful in consolidating them”.³⁹ Other studies have pointed to the implementation, whereby local authorities were less cooperative due to the fact they felt a ‘London’ approach was being imposed on them.⁴⁰ The former Greater Manchester Challenge Chief Advisor, Professor Mel Ainscow, reinforced this when he said: “in many ways the biggest challenge within the Challenge was the local authorities, not the schools”.⁴¹

It is also possible that City Challenge failed to replicate success because of structural factors. For example, London Challenge was able to produce better results due to a combination of school density and a number of outstanding schools who functioned as ‘teaching schools’. The Black Country’s limited supply of these schools and sparsity among them complicated the task of providing inter-school support.^{42,43}

Northern Powerhouse Schools Strategy

The Northern Powerhouse Schools strategy was informed by the Northern Schools Report by Sir Nick Weller, CEO of Dixons Academy, in 2016.⁴⁴ Weller identified a number of challenges faced by northern schools which were leading to underperformance, including teacher churn and a lack of strong leadership in disadvantaged areas.

Weller encouraged the DfE to apply a similar attitude as they did in London, building on a moral impetus that existed to turn schools around.⁴⁵ The recommendations followed this, including a ‘Teach North’ to attract and retain talented teachers, a consideration into how to raise the status of leadership roles in the North and greater accountability over schools that move to academy status.

There has been little scrutiny of whether this strategy delivered action or results, but there are reports that only 15 per cent of the £70 million allocated to the strategy was spent.⁴⁶

Opportunity Areas

The Opportunity Areas programme was launched in 2016, focusing on 12 local authority districts that were identified in the Social Mobility Index and the Achieving Excellence Areas Index as having particularly poor social mobility. Each local authority was allocated a DfE local delivery team, a partnership board which consisted of various industry professionals from the local area, and a number of subgroups of wider stakeholders to help oversee the project.

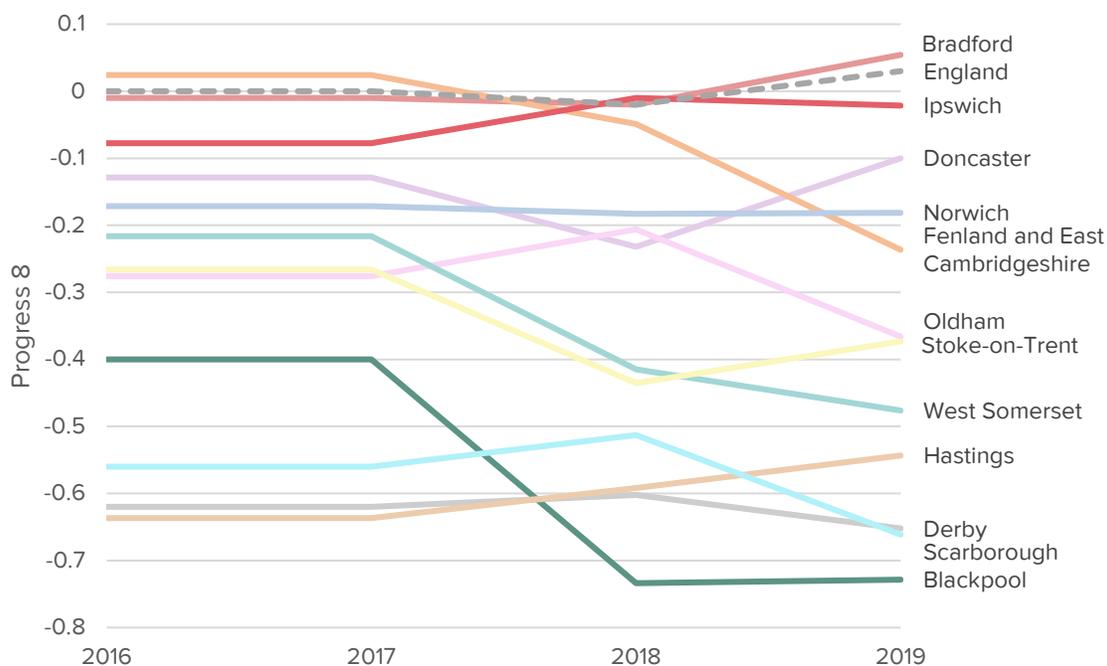
The official evaluation of Opportunity Areas suggests mixed results in the programme’s early years. The official evaluation, published in 2018, is largely qualitative and includes limited data about attainment or school quality. On the basis of those interviewed, the evaluation suggests that the overwhelming focus has been on how the Opportunity Areas should be implemented, at the expense of genuine attention to what they hoped to achieve or a rigorous assessment of the outcomes. For example, some interviewees suggested there was a lack of direction from Whitehall about expected improvement,

beyond a vague ‘improving social mobility’, which has made monitoring of progress particularly difficult. While each Opportunity Area did stipulate priority areas, for example improving maths teaching via maths hubs or expanding STEM training, there appears to be little sustained focus on delivery or accountability for the targets set for 2020-21.⁴⁷ The evaluation also suggests that the approach has at times not enjoyed the collaborative culture that existed within London Challenge, with one respondent arguing that “sometimes the partnership board felt too led by the Department of Education”.⁴⁸ The programme has also been criticised by the Chairman of the Education Select Committee, Robert Halfon for the reported £2 million spent on administration costs to date.⁴⁹

This is reinforced by the outcomes data. We looked at progress and attainment across every Opportunity Area relative to the England average since the launch of the programme in 2016. The results are not encouraging. Of the 12 areas included within the Opportunity Area programme in 2016, only 3 have progressed faster than the English average and only four local authorities have seen progress increase at all. In contrast, four local authorities have seen progress fall substantially: in Blackpool from -0.4 to -0.73, in Scarborough from -0.56 to -.67, in Stoke from -0.27 to 0.37 and in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire from 0.02 to -0.24. This should raise serious questions about whether further extending the model, rather than reforming it, will deliver the improvement that policymakers and parents demand.

Figure 23: Progress in Opportunity Areas relative to England average.

Source: DfE, Get Information About Schools, 2016-2019, Onward analysis



Solutions



This report has mapped the distribution of underperforming schools across England, and has attempted to understand the regional - and intra-regional - attainment gap the country faces.

We find that there are particular pockets of underperformance, some that have existed for some time and others that have cemented themselves in the last decade. These places often operate in a vicious cycle producing poor pupil outcomes which in turn reduces the likelihood of attracting the teachers, leaders or sponsors who are what the school desperately needs.

To unlock the talent that is abundant across the UK we must break this cycle. The challenge is to mobilise the structural capacity and invest in the systemic solution that will overhaul underperforming schools and deliver the change that is needed. The following chapter sets out a series of recommendations, designed to complement efforts to support the recovery from coronavirus, to this end.

Harness the power of Multi-Academy Trusts

Since 2010, the Government has invested in academy trusts to be the vehicle of school improvement. Over half of children are now educated in academies. Executive headteachers and multi-academy trust (MAT) CEOs are many of the leaders in school improvement.

However repeated attempts to use successful multi-academy trusts as vehicles for local area or school turnaround have struggled as a result of concerns over financial risk, trusts overextending, and a shortage of outstanding leaders capable of taking on underperforming schools and improving their fortunes. Some would argue you could almost count on two hands those who have the capacity, ability and drive to improve schools. These include Outwood Grange, Star, Reach, Harris, Dixons, Inspiration, Ark and Future Academies.

Despite a number of broadly successful interventions, such as the Regional Academy Growth Fund (RAGF) and Trust Capacity Fund (TCAF), there has only been limited success in scaling up small but effective MATs and using transformative MATs to turn around underperforming schools in the weakest areas.

1. Rank MATs for their ability to drive school improvement

A number of factors have compounded these issues. First, MATs have been incentivised to take on more schools than they have the capacity for. As the evaluation of the RAGF found, one MAT took on ten schools in one year despite a previous growth rate of 2 or 3 annually.⁵⁰ Second, there has been limited data by which MATs are encouraged to take over failing schools, meaning that schools without a proven track record of improvement and even those that had not taken in pupils yet have been eligible for funding.⁵¹ Therefore, some funding may have gone to the wrong organisations with little transparency over these decisions. In the RAGF evaluation, the most frequent response to questions about what a MAT needed to expand was capacity and a proven expertise in school improvement.⁵² Third, accountability measures are

heavily focused at school level, and do not reflect in detail the role of MATs in sponsorship and improvement. While the Government publishes annual league tables based on progress scores, these do not reflect the specific capabilities and expertise necessary to drive improvement.

The Government should seek to harness the power of MATs for local school improvement, especially in parts of the country where school outcomes are weak. To achieve this, we recommend that Ministers ask Ofsted to introduce performance rankings for every MAT around key measures linked to school improvement. As well as attainment and progress measures, this should include leadership, teacher retention, CPD provision and pupil behaviour, combined into a single score to measure the effectiveness of each MAT in turning around a school's fortunes. Ofsted should be given these powers to inspect MATs, by considering the schools themselves (either a sample or all schools if necessary) alongside inspecting the overall governance.

To reduce gaming, schools should be ranked higher for improving schools that had been consistently underperforming for several years before taking them on, and ranked lower for taking on schools that were improving prior to them joining the MAT.

2. Reintroduce generous funding for the most effective MATs to take on failing schools and enter areas of stubborn underperformance

The best MATs, perhaps the top quartile, should be eligible for generous funding to support them to take on underperforming schools, with extra funding when expanding into areas where there is a deficit of good schools, to encourage taking on a handful of schools in the area. This would reintroduce the generous funding that the department used to extend to high performing MATs to take on difficult schools, which allowed them to invest in new buildings, teacher quality and curriculum materials and without which many MATs will be reluctant to take on the most difficult schools.

This funding could be an extension of the existing Trust Capacity Fund or MAT Development and Improvement Fund, and should be appropriate for the time-frame of school improvement, which tends to be between two and four years.⁵³ This would help to de-risk taking on new schools, making it sustainable to do so whilst maintaining an existing network.⁵⁴ The decisions around funding for growth should be completely transparent to ensure effective accountability on the aims of investment.

Meanwhile, the lowest ranked MATs should be restricted from taking on underperforming schools to prevent them overextending their reach at pupils' expense. This would hone the number of MATs able to take on underperforming schools but ensure that when they are incorporated into a MAT they are given support from a MAT that is experienced in turning around a school, rather than one without a proven track record at school improvement.

We recognise that limiting eligibility, where there is arguably already a shortage of those willing to step in, may appear misjudged. However we strongly believe that doing this would incentivise the best MATs to expand and take on underperforming primary and secondary schools, while focusing those that are less effective on improving their existing schools. Moreover where there are no eligible MATs to take over a failing school, Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) could be empowered to broker an exceptional arrangement for it to be taken over by another MAT.

3. Allow schools to leave their multi-academy trust to join a better suited MAT or to expand a successful model into a new MAT

Multi-academy trusts have been a successful model for school improvement in many areas of the country, giving struggling schools the leadership and support to expand and creating greater resilience in a more autonomous school system. But the model is currently unidirectional: geared towards schools joining MATs rather than the legitimate reasons why schools might need to re-broker to another MAT or establish their own.

Until now mobility between MATs has been mostly driven by ad hoc re-brokering by Regional Schools Commissioners and the Department for Education. This has generally worked but the expansion of MATs means a formal mechanism will soon be needed. The number of re-brokerings has also been increasing year on year, reaching 241 transfers in 2019/20.⁵⁵ There were varying reasons for this, but the most common was the transfer being requested by the outgoing trust. There are a number of examples of this, regularly as a result of the existing MAT being ill equipped to tackle the particular challenges of that school, leading to poor outcomes, or because it is geographically distant from the trust's core catchment. Where schools' placements within MATs are not working successfully, schools and trusts should have the ability to part ways, and for the school to join another MAT or - if they are outstanding with proven school improvement expertise and want to grow their model - establish their own trust.

The Government should therefore introduce rules specifying how underperforming schools can transfer out of a MAT if they feel that theirs is not adequately equipped to respond to the relevant challenges. This is something the Educational Excellence Everywhere White Paper considered, creating space for parents to petition RSCs so the school their children attends can move to another MAT.⁵⁶ But we recommend going further.

Ministers should make clear that if the school, the MAT and the RSC agree change is needed, and a suitable alternate sponsor is available, this transition should be made. Where the school desires change but the parent MAT refuses the transition, the RSC should be able to take the final decision on the basis of what is in the best interests of the pupils. At this point, the RSC could assess the MAT's record of improvement.

As exceptionally performing trusts grow, MATs operating across multiple regions should be able to agree a direct transition with another MAT so both are able to realise further growth plans. This should be extended to types and phases of schooling. For example, if one MAT operates a trust predominantly including primary schools with a single secondary school elsewhere, and a second MAT has predominantly secondary schools

but a primary in the first MAT's locale, a brokering system by mutual agreement should be available, with the final decision considered and authorised by the RSC.

Further, when schools are consistently high performing and the leadership would like to establish their own MAT to grow the model, they should do so. This would give a school leadership the ability to request independence, either with the agreement of their MAT or by petitioning the RSC who will make the final determination. This would aim to encourage leading trusts to grow their impact not only through direct expansion but also by incubating and supporting future MATs, which they could spin out as sister organisations in different parts of the country.

This should be supported by a concerted effort to monitor progress when a school academises or re-brokers. The current system, whereby a school gains a new URN number when there is a change of governance, renders comparison and overtime judgements particularly difficult. An option to amend this would be to publish annually a database of the schools who change URN number, creating a lookup file for those that wish to compare overtime.

4. Extend the Curriculum Fund to support successful MATs in extending their pedagogical approach

Alongside encouraging MATs to expand and take over existing schools, there is another method that could be used to harness their expertise: curriculum. Studies suggest that a well-rounded and knowledge-rich curriculum can provide strong benefits for teacher and pupil. By employing a strategy with a particular emphasis on sequencing knowledge, pupils are able to better recollect what they have been taught within the context of their wider education.⁵⁷ Breadth of knowledge is also an important tool for social mobility as, when taught properly, it can disproportionately help disadvantaged pupils who are less likely to gain cultural knowledge at home.⁵⁸

The Government established a Curriculum Fund pilot programme which selected 11 lead schools to expand their teaching approach to six or more participating schools. Within the pilot the lead schools provided a range of resources, schemes of work, lesson and assessment materials and training to the participating schools.

The early findings evaluation found that 79 per cent of teachers felt the pilot reduced the complexity of lesson planning, 72 per cent felt it reduced teacher workload and those involved also felt pupils had a higher level of subject knowledge as a result.⁵⁹ Where issues with the pilot were raised, it was frequently in relation to not enough time being given to sufficiently recruit and develop relationships with the partnership schools.

Ministers should expand and develop the Curriculum Fund to encourage successful MATs to carry forward their pedagogical approach to other schools. This should build on the existing funding formula, whereby a maximum of £150,000 was awarded annually per subject curriculum programme and schools were able to access £100,000 for every additional subject curriculum provided. It should be stipulated within the grant

scheme that the focus should be on improving education standards in underperforming places.

The MAT should either nominate one school to receive the funding and develop the programme, or arrange a partnership of the schools within the trust to develop the programme collaboratively. Following the creation of the curriculum and resources, the trusts involved should receive a smaller amount annually to continue to update and expand their approach.

There are a large number of stuck schools which require different forms of intervention

In 2017, Ofsted analysis highlighted 490 ‘stuck schools’ which had been in a cycle of inadequacy for 5 years or more.⁶⁰ These schools tend to have higher rates of free school meal pupils than the national average and have often been re-brokered between academy trusts multiple times due to poor performance, with little or no discernible effect on outcomes. This entrenched underperformance fails pupils, parents and the communities the schools serve.

In many of these instances, it is not that long-term underperforming schools have simply been left to their own devices and this is why they have been failing. Instead, they have frequently had new headteachers brought in, been re-brokered and re-structured on more than one occasion and yet they are still struggling to deliver for their pupils. This kind of tinkering breeds frustration, for example in Knowsley it is reported parents, headteachers and councillors grew increasingly tired of the educational experimentation taking place.⁶¹ This was particularly in reference to a ‘kinaesthetic learning approach’ that was employed, encouraging pupils to learn actively with their bodies and senses rather than traditional, desk based learning.⁶² This example, along with countless others suggests that when interventions to operate within a struggling school have failed, there needs to be a Plan B.

5. Fund a wave of “Phoenix Schools” to replace consistently underperforming institutions

In stuck schools, a more direct form of intervention is warranted. Letting them continue to underperform for another five years does nothing to support children’s outcomes and compounds a culture of low expectations in some of the disadvantaged areas of the country, frustrating ministers’ efforts to level up.

It should be a last resort, but there should be a time when ministers say enough is enough and accept that repeated interventions have failed. In these instances - which will be rare - the Government should have the power to mandate the closure of the school and the establishment of a new “phoenix school” - funded through a new wave of free schools - to rise from its ashes. This could be supported by a thorough inspection of the incumbent school prior to closing, akin to what was recommended by Ofsted, to understand the central issues that it faced and better equip the new school.⁶³

As the NFER evaluation found, free schools tend to take on a larger share of disadvantaged pupils whilst also delivering better results compared to other schools.⁶⁴ These schools should receive experienced new leadership, capital improvements and fresh oversight through a renewed governing body or MAT governance.

Ministers could also give these “phoenix schools” a limited period exempt from inspection, to give the new leadership time to introduce a new culture and standards among pupils and parents. They would be supported by Regional Schools Commissioners, who could recommend to ministers an emergency inspection if problems emerged during this grace period or if any safeguarding concerns were reported.

To aid the brokering with new sponsors, ministers should consider expanding the model of the Falcon Education Academy Trust. Falcon was set up shortly before the pandemic hit, with the goal to take on ‘orphan’ schools in the North – those who are underperforming and regularly without sponsorship – and turn them around, before passing them onto a new MAT once performance has improved. Whilst the trust’s expansion has been hindered as a result of the coronavirus crisis, the intention is the right one. It is chaired by the Chairman of Outwood Grange, David Earnshaw and has also appointed Kamruddin Kothia, Chair of Trustees at Star Academies, as a director.

6. The Government should work to release schools from restrictive PFI contracts where they are hindering pupil progress

There are several examples of schools failing to secure a new sponsor due to the terms and conditions of existing PFI contracts. This is the height of dysfunction: the educational prospects of children being sacrificed for a long-term financing arrangement designed for national accounting purposes.

But the reasons for trusts being unwilling to take on PFI schools are understandable: they feel unable to bear the risk of taking on a school that is failing (and potentially undersubscribed) when that school is tied into incredibly expensive contracts for many years ahead. The liability - on top of the reputational risk of taking on an underperforming school - is often too great.

While these issues can be - and are - negotiated on a school by school level, the systemic issue will not be solved without central government intervention. Ministers should begin negotiations with PFI providers around a wholesale renegotiation of PFI deals in order to introduce flexibility when a school is underperforming.

For example, where a school is failing, the Government might be able to secure the ability to buy out the remainder of the contract at a discounted price on behalf of the school, with a view to either holding the asset in trust or transfer it to the MAT when they take on the school. This may prove expensive. But PFI providers typically have multiple contracts across the public sector and therefore have an incentive to renegotiate in good faith. Most importantly, the long-term costs of not acting on individual pupils are considerable.

Address the engrained workforce challenges in underperforming schools

“The quality of a school cannot exceed the quality of its teachers”. The words of Andreas Schleicher of the OECD have become something of a cliché but the principle holds true. School improvement is impossible without improving the quality of teaching. Research shows that the best schools are invariably those with inspiring teachers and devoted leaders whose brilliance sustains a culture of learning and aspiration. The worst schools suffer from poor teaching and weak leadership which undermines pupil outcomes and limits their horizons after they have left. Without intervention in the teaching and leadership of struggling schools, underperforming areas will simply not improve.

In recent years, the Government has rightly introduced a range of policies to improve the quality of teaching, including: the introduction and extension of the Curriculum Fund pilots; a new Early Career Framework and Recruitment and Retention Strategy; a new Institute of Teaching to train up to 1,000 new teachers each year and a review of the initial teacher training market. These policies will all help to improve the quality of teaching.

But they may have a limited effect in the places where good teaching is most urgently needed. Recent history shows how hard it is to convince outstanding teachers to teach in underperforming schools or to convince great leaders to relocate to places where there are few good schools. To help level up opportunity in the places we describe in earlier chapters, a more targeted approach is needed that fundamentally restructures the incentives for outstanding teachers and leaders. This is not to criticise the existing workforce, who work valiantly often in the face of huge challenges, but to support them with greater mobility, rather than being forced to accept that their most talented colleagues will go elsewhere.

There are two ways the Government could seek to boost the quality of teachers directly in underperforming schools and the places where they are most concentrated: encourage outstanding teachers to move to those schools, or boost the quality of existing teachers in those schools. In practice, the Government needs to do both.

7. Ministers should reward outstanding teachers who move to underperforming schools

First, the Government should introduce direct financial incentives for experienced teachers in outstanding schools to move to underperforming schools. We recommend that teachers working in an outstanding school who have reached M4 on the main pay scale should be eligible for an automatic bonus of £10,000 per year (roughly equivalent to an additional four month's salary) if they move to an Inadequate or Requiring Improvement school for a minimum of three years. To control the cost to the taxpayer, this scheme should be limited to 200 teachers in the first instance.

For those teaching in academies and therefore not necessarily following the main pay scale, their position and salary should be benchmarked by the academy so they can be viewed comparatively with colleagues at M4 or above. If the teacher does not remain at the school they would be required to hand the bonus back, in order to prevent the

scheme leading to increased greater teacher churn. A smaller sum could be provided annually if they remain at the school after the three years, up to a maximum of six years.

Eligibility could also extend to teachers who receive the Teaching and Learning Responsibility Payment, which rewards additional leadership and management responsibilities undertaken by classroom teachers. Payments could be made directly through teachers' payroll, with schools reimbursed automatically by the Department for Education through the schools grant, or paid direct from HMRC to teachers through the tax system.

There is precedent for such a scheme in the United States. The Talent Transfer Initiative (TTI) in the United States awarded high-performing teachers (identified using value added scores) \$10,000 a year, for up to two years, for taking up new positions at a low-performing school. Where they stayed on in this position at low performing schools they received \$5,000 a year for up to two years.⁶⁵ Evaluations suggest TTI helped to fill 9 out of 10 vacancies in the target low-performing schools and 60 per cent of teachers stayed in the positions once the payments stopped. Additionally, at elementary level attainment increased by between 4 to 10 percentage points relative to the control group.⁶⁶

8. Introduce a Teacher Premium to improve teaching quality among existing teachers

Schools with a higher share of pupils on free school meals tend to have lower attainment and are more likely to be rated Inadequate or Requiring Improvement. The pupil premium was introduced both to help, and incentivise, schools to take on the pupils that are the most disadvantaged and therefore more challenging to teach. The policy is broadly considered to be a success, helping schools to pay for targeted support for children most in need.

The same principles apply to the teaching workforce as apply to pupils. There is no direct incentive for underperforming schools to invest in their workforce, and many struggling schools suffer from low pupil numbers and financial difficulties that can undermine their ability to do so. Meanwhile the best schools, with sustainable finances, are both culturally and financially well disposed to a culture of teaching improvement. This is one of the reasons why the best schools keep getting better but the worst schools have remained “stuck” for decades.

We recommend that the Government introduce a “Teacher Premium” to complement the Pupil Premium, to help and incentivise schools to invest in the quality of their workforce. The Teacher Premium would be an annual stipend per teacher that could only be spent on accredited teacher training and continuous professional development. It would be paid to underperforming schools where over 37 per cent of their pupils are eligible for free school meals.

9. Review the use of supply teachers and teaching assistants

Just as research shows that the best way to improve outcomes is to recruit and retain the very best teachers, it also shows that it is not possible to offset poor teaching with higher numbers of support staff.

For example, research by the Institute of Education on class sizes for 5 to 7 year olds found that: “There was no clear evidence for any year, for either literacy or mathematics, that additional staff or additional adults in the class had an effect on children’s progress, and there was no apparent ‘compensation’ effect of having extra adults in the class. This result is consistent with the STAR project, where it was found that there was no compensatory effect of having extra staff in larger (regular) classes. It is also supported by other recent research.”⁶⁷

More recently, the Education Endowment Foundation has published a toolkit which suggests that TAs providing support to individual pupils or small groups can have ‘moderate positive benefits’ on attainment, but general classroom support does not have a measurable impact on attainment.⁶⁸ Some recent research for the Department of Education has shown that the presence of a teaching assistant can have a detrimental impact on low attaining pupils or those with special educational needs.⁶⁹

This suggests that schools should not be trying to use teaching assistants and supply staff to improve teaching quality. But this appears to be exactly what many schools have attempted to do. In 1999 there were just 69,600 teaching assistants in England. By 2009, this had grown to 183,700 and by 2019, this figure was 265,167. This represents a quadrupling of the teaching assistant workforce in two decades.⁷⁰ Per pupil expenditure on education support staff (a wider category which includes teaching assistants) increased by 138% in real terms between 2002-03 and 2016-17, eight times that seen in expenditure on teachers.⁷¹

This is particularly true among underperforming schools. In many of these instances, schools are using teaching assistants to mitigate the influence of the most challenging pupils on the rest of the class’ learning and as outlined earlier in this report, there is a strong correlation between underperformance and overreliance on teaching assistants and supply staff. The risk is that schools with already high vacancy and absence rates and unstable supply teaching are compounding the schools’ problems rather than alleviating them through overdependence on TAs and supply staff.

We recommend that the Department for Education undertake a comprehensive review of the role of teaching assistants and how they are being used, particularly in underperforming schools and schools with high vacancy rates. This should look at all types and phases of school. This should explicitly include local authority maintained schools, which should publish spending on supply teachers and teaching assistants each financial year.

This review should attempt to understand whether the growth in the employment of teaching assistants is warranted, especially in the instances where pupil premium allowances are being funneled to cover such costs.

Increase accountability around schools support for disadvantaged pupils

Much of this report, and recent education policy, has used Ofsted's four tier overall effectiveness ratings to judge standards of education in England. There are a number of merits to this approach, not least because it is a widely comprehensible system trusted to provide objective judgements about school governance and standards.

However, as Chapter 3 indicates, there is much more that determines an underperforming school than what is within the remit of Ofsted inspections. The clearest example of this is the characteristics of their pupil intake, with suggestions that some schools are gaming the system by taking the least challenging pupils at the expense of those who will need the most support. This is true among non-selective state schools even when they are theoretically open to all, as a result of complex admissions procedures and off-rolling.

10. Ofsted should take levels of pupil disadvantage and prior learning into account within its inspection regime

Ofsted, the schools inspectorate, has taken a number of steps to better reflect relative improvement in educational outcomes rather than absolute attainment in its latest inspection framework, notably by focusing on the quality of the curriculum. But it remains the case that Ofsted judgements primarily reflect outputs rather than outcomes and more could be done to recognise the schools that deliver on social mobility measures.

The new Education Inspection Framework has addressed this to some extent, removing outstanding schools' exemption from routine inspections in favour of a Section 5 inspection. This is a welcome development as it responds to a number of concerns surrounding letting outstanding schools off the hook on their duty to social mobility, something that was raised by Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman in 2018.⁷²

However we believe Ofsted could go further, with an explicit consideration into how the inspection framework could better account for the characteristics of schools' intake. This should include prior learning outcomes and disadvantage to mark up those that deliver above average improvement and mark down those who largely deliver attainment and progress measures due to the average performance of their catchment areas or other means. We acknowledge that some of this consideration already exists within the Leadership and Management Ofsted grade.⁷³ However, given the overall effectiveness score still dominates discourse surrounding school quality, we believe more should be done to ensure that a school cannot be rated outstanding if it is clearly not delivering on its duties to disadvantaged pupils in the community.

The current HM Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, has in the past argued that such an approach would risk a dilution of Ofsted's focus on high standards. However, this would not necessarily equate to lower expectations on schools that have disadvantaged intakes, but rather a change of focus, improving outcomes for all rather than simply focusing on the brightest and the best. It would ensure Ofsted evaluates a whole schools approach to social mobility by recognising their approach to teaching and

learning for their intake protects and prioritises the role of education in improving a young persons' life chances.

11. Recognise the best educators with a Queen's Award for Education

Alongside formal measures of a schools' progress and attainment, we should seek to directly acknowledge the individuals and organisations who are at the centre of these efforts.

Ministers should recognise those who go above and beyond to promote social mobility by providing brilliant education. Whilst contributions to education and children's services are regularly considered in the New Years honours list, this would be a wider recognition, acknowledging the vital role school leaders play in educating the next generation and ultimately contributing to our productivity as a nation.

One option for this would be to create a new Queen's Award for Education. Working on a similar model to the Enterprise or Voluntary Service award, a committee with representatives from each of the eight regions in England represented by RSCs could nominate the headteachers, CEOs and school leaders either individually or on behalf of the organisation who provide a valiant service to education, especially when working within the constraints of poverty and disadvantage. The process would be overseen by DfE and show public appreciation to the individuals awarded.

12. Improve teaching time and use additional time spent on extracurricular learning

The coronavirus pandemic prompted a collapse in teaching time that has disproportionately affected underperforming schools and disadvantaged pupils. Research by the Sutton Trust suggests 40% of pupils in middle class homes were doing over 5 hours of learning a day, compared to 26% in working class households. Children from working class households also received less help from parents when home schooling.

This will require a concerted campaign of activity to catch up on lost learning, but this will not be possible in many schools without confronting the existing reasons they might be closing early. While the scope of this report has focussed on structural interventions to improve school quality overall, not the approach to catching up after the pandemic, this should be considered as a mechanism to bolster outcomes for young people in the long term.

Maintained schools are required to be open a minimum of 380 sessions (equivalent to 190 school days) each academic year, while academies have autonomy over the length of their school days. Over the years, there have been a number of reports coming from parents and teacher surveys, of schools reducing their teaching time, often to a 4 and a half day week, as a result of financial pressures.⁷⁴ This has been particularly acute in Birmingham, however there are also reports of it elsewhere.

Reducing time in school can have detrimental effects to wider society. It puts additional childcare pressures on parents, with cases of some schools charging parents to look

after their children outside of core teaching time, despite being within the traditional school day.⁷⁵ It can lead to increased violence, for example the British Medical Journal found that knife crime hospitalisations amongst under 16s tend to peak after school between 4pm and 6pm.⁷⁶ And crucially it can have detrimental effects on pupils' progression and learning, particularly for extracurricular activities and wider practical learning which are the first to be sacrificed with depleted teaching time.

There has been much discussion about ambitions for a longer school day as part of the recovery plan. While these debates are ongoing, there is a need to understand why teaching time has been reduced in the past and what the financial imperatives are behind the varied length of school days. This could be done by expanding the use of School Resource Management Advisors (SRMAs) working in maintained and academy schools. These are intended to provide impartial advice to schools on efficient resource-use and how to distribute revenues to best deliver educational outcomes.

SRMAs were trialed in 2017/18. After 72 visits, 94% of trusts rated their experience of working with an SRMA as 'good' or 'very good' and £35 million worth of savings were identified. The programme was extended until August 2020 as a result.⁷⁷ Therefore where schools are under-serving their pupils due to stretched finances, DfE should support them to understand where the problem lies. Auditing SRMA interventions, alongside the review of a longer school day will allow ministers and crucially HM Treasury to understand the true cost of, and reasons behind, the varied offer of teaching, homework and enrichment time nationally.

This additional time in school should be allocated to tutoring pupils who have fallen behind alongside additional extracurricular and practical learning activities. Learning outside the core curriculum is likely to have been limited in the past year, for example during the November restrictions whilst schools were open, guidance recommended extracurricular and out of school clubs to be curtailed if not providing essential childcare.⁷⁸ This is supported by findings by the Education Endowment Foundation which argues that additional time in school is more effective if it is not bound solely to academia.⁷⁹

One way to facilitate pupil enrichment, extracurricular activity and character development among disadvantaged pupils would be to ring fence an element of the Pupil Premium specifically for these purposes - where there is a clear evidence base for positive outcomes.

For example, the Government could issue guidance making clear that 10 per cent of Pupil Premium spending should be on extracurricular activity such as music, drama, adventure and out of school trips. This would automatically direct around £270 million a year towards these activities, equivalent to £150 for every child receiving pupil premium.

Moreover, many of these activities could be delivered by charities and local groups outside teaching time rather than by school staff during the school day. The flexibility of this model is proven by the successful Challenger Trust model already under development in six Local Youth Partnerships. Many other schemes, such as the National Citizen Service and Duke of Edinburgh remain free but under-recruited.

13. Expand the implementation of interventions that work, such as tutoring

The National Tutoring Programme was launched at the end of last year. Initially backed with £350 million worth of funding, the scheme was created to provide targeted one to one or small group support for the pupils who need it most. This funding has been supplemented with an additional £1 billion, which can also be used to employ local tutors as well as those nationally accredited. Unfortunately this has also coincided with a reduction in total spending on the Pupil Premium, as a result of a change in methodology determining who is eligible, possibly amounting to around £130 million.⁸⁰

The National Tutoring Programme has experienced some teething problems due to low uptake: the Minister told the Education Select Committee that the department is “concerned about lower take-up rates in different parts of the country”. This is most notable in the North East, where there appears to be limited access to high quality tutors able to deliver the scheme. Whilst opening the scheme up to local tutors will hopefully alleviate this issue, allowing existing teachers to tutor as part of the scheme outside of their regular teaching hours would likely also improve availability.

Additionally, as of April less than half of those who have been enrolled in the tutoring scheme are eligible for free school meals, despite those pupils being the programme’s focus.⁸¹

This calls for a longer term approach that directly incentivises interventions for disadvantaged pupils, such as high quality tutoring. The Education Endowment Foundation has published a teaching and learning toolkit for effective interventions to improve pupil’s progress. This list of interventions with proven efficacy in improving the educational outcomes should be explicitly linked to the majority of a school’s Pupil Premium spend. Where interventions such as tutoring are employed, they should take place in addition to the core curriculum teaching time, not in place of it. Regional Schools Commissioners should broaden their role to ensure the implementation of these approaches.

While this would reduce school autonomy, it would create more of a direct link between the Pupil Premium and the improvement of education for the children who are meant to benefit from it and ensure that within existing school budgets improvements can be delivered.

14. Replace the Opportunity Areas with a much more intensive and structured programme of interventions

The measures recommended thus far are designed to create economies of scale, capable of responding to entrenched underperformance through structural improvements to our education system, and rewarding those who go above and beyond to improve outcomes for pupils.

Implementing these at a national level would disproportionately help struggling areas, particularly where there is a clustering of underperforming schools. However there is

another option that Ministers could consider: intensive and structured interventions in the places that need the most help. We have identified many of them in this report.

The Opportunity Areas programme has largely been levelled with two main criticisms: it was too selective in where it was set up, and where it did operate, too much focus has been on implementation and process at the expense of a full-blooded, long lasting theory of change. As a result, many of the places that have historically struggled with poor standards of education have continued to do so. As this report has highlighted, there are more than 12 of them and some places that require the most help are not included in the current list.

We believe there is a case for going much further with a targeted local model of intervention, but to do so in a much more structured way. Instead of the partnership board led approach introduced in 2016, which has led to a panoply of different initiatives and little concerted intervention, the Government should allocate significant funding and political capital towards a long term, structured programme of intervention in the places that really need support. Places like South Derbyshire and Knowsley, Doncaster and Fenland. The menu of interventions should include:

- Setting an ambitious target for school turnaround, with every school in the area meeting the national average level of attainment within 5 years and every school to be rated good or outstanding within a decade.
- Financial incentives to convince the best MATs to sponsor a cluster of schools in these areas, including using Phoenix schools if required.
- Targeted and intensive use of tutoring for targeted support in schools with particularly weak standards and in subject areas where learning is weak.
- Implementing golden handcuffs bonuses for outstanding teachers and leaders, incentivising them to take up the challenge of moving to an area for a sustained period of time.

In addition, this support should be allocated on the basis of need, working on criteria such as availability of good or outstanding schools, progress scores and progression to 16+ education to determine eligibility, rather than the slightly opaque approach that informed the 2016 Opportunity Areas.

For too long we have left much of our education system up to chance, hoping that new sponsors and great leaders will take the helm where it is needed. We should be aspiring to build up the capacity in these places so great school leaders can respond to the challenges themselves, and so we can support them along the way to do so. This would not be an extension of the Opportunity Areas, but a better option, less constrained by one-time modelling and driven by refusing to accept underperformance.

Conclusion



The pandemic has been a watershed moment for education. What was once described as a 'great leveller' now appears to have disproportionately affected those who cannot work from home, who live in high occupancy housing and who cannot afford to self-isolate themselves. It has also exacerbated problems in our school system by limiting a child's learning opportunities overwhelmingly to their access to a laptop.

As we argued at the onset of this paper, restoring education standards to where they were pre-pandemic will not deliver for all children in England. Where a child grows up significantly influences the quality of education they can receive. And while the pockets of stubborn underperformance do not follow a strong geographical pattern, they follow closely the areas most in need of levelling up. If we are to successfully grant these cities, towns and villages the tools they need to succeed we cannot ignore the institutions at the very start of an individual's life.

We will not level up unless we build a school system that gives everyone, no matter where they live, a chance at a decent education, and we will not achieve that unless we complement the short-term investment in catch up post-pandemic with bold systemic reforms to boost school quality in the places where it is absent.

Endnotes



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The Taskforce is made up of more than 60 Conservative MPs from constituencies right across the country. It aims to champion ideas that boost Britain's lagging areas and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to make the best of their talent, no matter where they are from.

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