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Educational underachievement in Northern Ireland

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This paper considers the persistence of the educational attainment gap between socially disadvantaged pupils and all others. This includes an examination of existing policies to tackle the attainment gap, more recent proposals to raise educational outcomes for all, and how other jurisdictions are dealing with the same issue.

Paper 16/25 NIAR-22-2025

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Key Points

- Educational underachievement remains a persistent and seemingly intractable problem not just in Northern Ireland but across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

- The causes of, and factors contributing to, underachievement are now well-known. The policy responses to tackle the problem could be described as eclectic, experimental and not always well-evaluated.

- In some cases, there is conflicting evidence as to the merits of policy interventions such as *Targeting Social Need*. The NI Audit report was highly critical of this initiative, yet schools self-report its effectiveness. Similarly, Northern Ireland *Sure Start* was criticised by the Audit Office but praised by recipients in the *Fair Start* report.

- The Education Minister (Paul Givan) has highlighted tackling educational disadvantage as one of his priorities in response to the *Independent Review of Education* (2023). At the same time, recommendations on dealing with underachievement contained in the *Fair Start* report (2021) lack sufficient implementation funding.

- The metric for tracking underachievement is gaining less than five or more GCSEs at A*-C (including English and Maths). Although this allows for year-on-year comparisons, it captures the problem too late in the cycle of pupils' learning journey.

- Research shows that the attainment gap opens up from pre-school.[1] We know, for example, that poor school attendance is a key cause of low educational outcomes. Monitoring attendance at Key Stage 4 is simply confirming the obvious link to poor examination results.

[1] Intergenerational Inequality

- There are examples where schools with a high number of free school meal entitled (FSME) pupils perform well, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) non-grammar sector in particular. These schools offer opportunities for shared learning from their experiences. This could also include encouraging grammar schools to accept a greater share of FSME pupils[2] who perform better in the grammar than non-grammar sector, although not as well as their non-free school meal entitled counterparts (NFSME).

- Education as a policy area, and tackling the attainment gap, has a low profile in the *draft Programme for Government 2024-27*. There is one reference to the school leavers' attainment gap in the accompanying *Wellbeing Framework*. In the face of other competing public policy priorities, it will be important to track progress to ensure policy implementation on tackling underachievement.

- Much of the existing academic research and policy papers emphasise the role of cross-departmental collaboration in tackling the multi-faceted problems associated with educational underachievement. Joined-up government on this issue has proved particularly difficult to achieve in practice.

[2] The Independent Review of Education proposed that "that grammar schools should admit at least the same percentage of pupils with FSME as among the total number of applicants" to reduce educational disparity. (Independent Review of Education, 2023, Vol 2: 46).

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1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the causes of educational underachievement and the persistent gap in performance between pupils from less advantaged backgrounds in Northern Ireland. First, we look at the size of the attainment gap at GCSE and A Levels and existing research which offers insights into the causes of underachievement. This is useful in outlining factors which inhibit or enhance better attainment amongst disadvantaged pupils. Second, we consider a number of policy responses by the Department of Education (DENI) aimed at tackling underachievement, including pre-existing policies such as the *Pathway Fund (2016)*, *Targeting Social Need (2005)*, *Extended Schools (2006)*, and proposed policies coming out of the *Fair Start Report* and the *Independent Review of Education*. Third, we look at other UK and Ireland jurisdictions to see how they are tackling the attainment gap. Finally, we draw some conclusions based on the above.

Underachievement has been defined as "school performance, usually measured by grades, that is substantially below what would be predicted on the basis of the student's mental ability, typically measured by intelligence or standardised academic tests".[3] The term 'achievement', in the Northern Ireland context, generally refers to how well pupils perform at secondary school level (16 and 18 years) in GCSEs and A levels respectively, not least because there are standardised ways of measuring educational outcomes at these points. The Governing Bodies Association which represents grammar schools in Northern Ireland draws the distinction between underachievement and low attainment by defining the former as "as children and young people not reaching their potential based on their ability, evidenced by analytical data and the positive school and societal influence and guidance that shape young people."[4]

[3] McCall,R.,Evahn,C.& Kratzer,L.(1992)High school underachievers (Thousand Oaks,CA,Sage) cited in Stephen Gorard & Emma Smith (2004) What is 'underachievement' at school? School Leadership & Management, 24:2, 205-225 What is underachievement?

[4] Governing Bodies Association submission (2020) to Independent Panel on Education

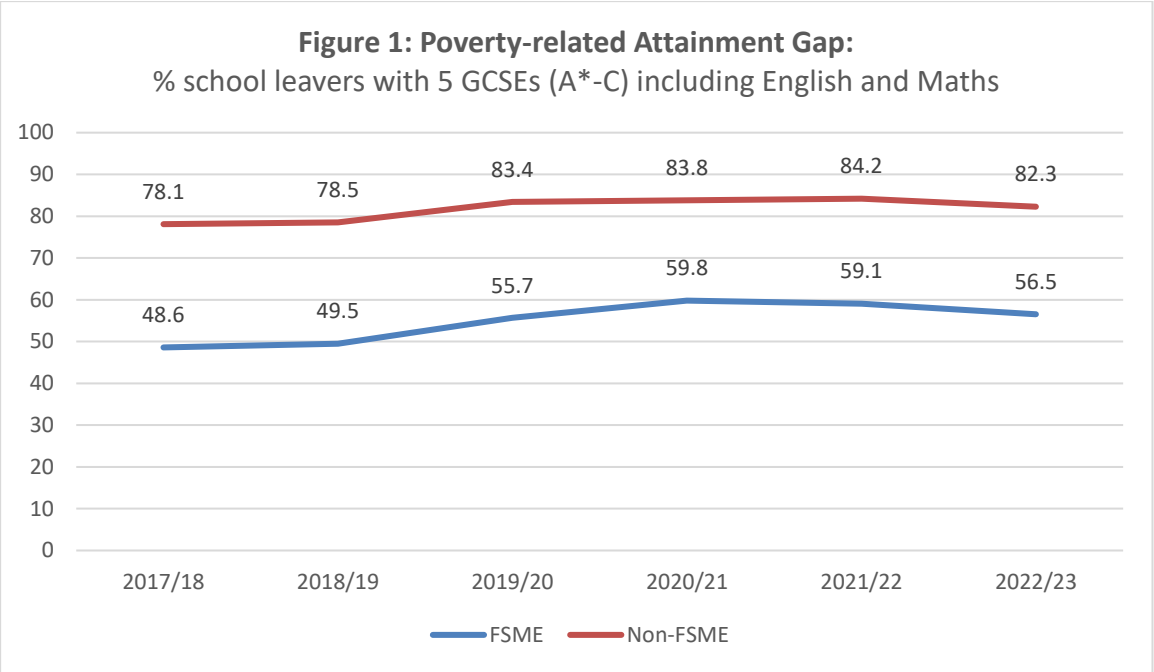
The educational attainment gap in Northern Ireland measures the educational outcomes of those pupils eligible for free schools meals (FSME) and compares them with those who are not entitled (NFSME). Pupils are eligible for free school meals if their parent receive social security support for low incomes.[5] The gap is measured using the percentage of leavers who have attained at least 5 GCSEs (A* to C) including English and Maths.[6] However, attainment gaps between the most and least advantaged children appear from early years through to graduate outcomes across the UK.[7] The most recent data (2022/23) on school leavers in Northern Ireland show that there was an attainment gap of 25.8% between NFSME and FSME school leavers. Put differently, 82.3% of non-free meal school leavers had at least 5 GCSEs (A* to C) including English and Maths compared to 56.5% free school meal leavers (a gap of 25.8%) – see figure 1.[8] Although the poverty-related gap has narrowed over the last five years from 2017/18 to 2022/23 by 3.7%, these figures may have been positively impacted by examination assessments during the COVID period.

[5] In Scotland the government uses the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation which measures the level of deprivation in the neighbourhood rather than within the individual family. Parent occupational status can also be used – lower occupational status is associated with lower income and can be used as an alternative measure when no other data are available (Joseph Rowntree Foundation: UK Poverty 2023: 107).

[6] Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government: school attainment gap: Attainment Gap.

[7] Intergenerational inequalities

[8] As a result of changes to the processes for awarding qualifications, in response to the pandemic, more recent data beyond the year 2018/19 is unreliable.

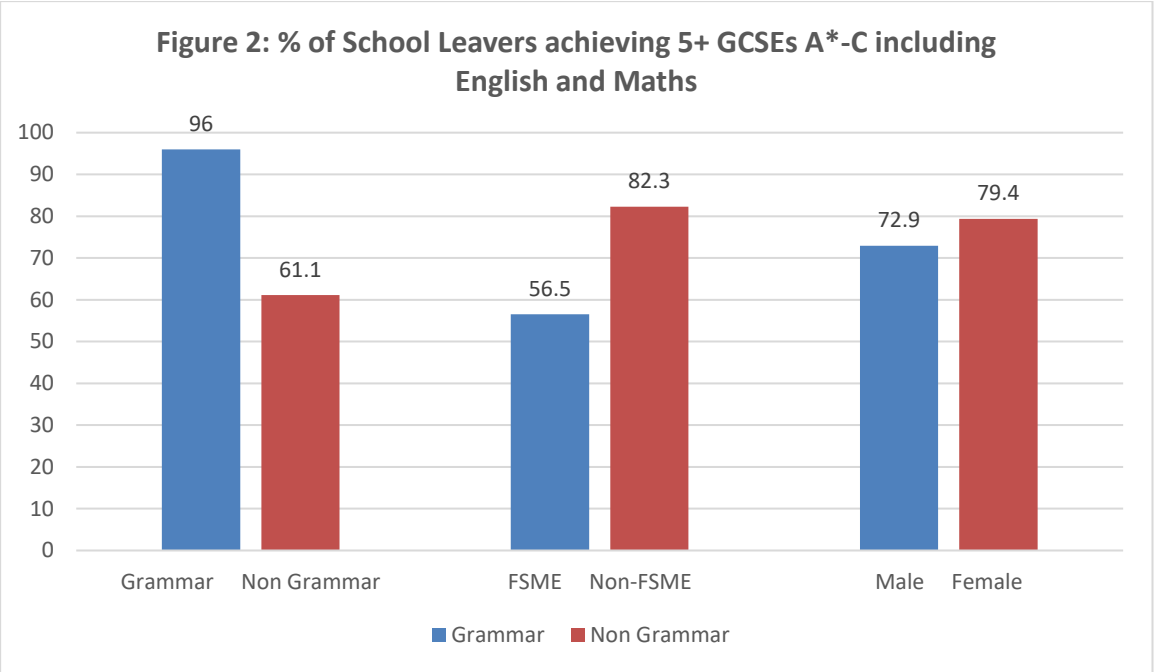


Source: Qualifications and destination of school leavers DENI.

The data also show that 96.0% of pupils leaving grammar schools in Northern Ireland in 2022/23 achieved 5 GCSEs (A* to C) including English and Maths compared to 61.1% of pupils leaving non-grammar schools (see figure 2).[9]

Looking at English schools performance data, an approximate comparison (percentage of pupils achieving grade 5 or above in both GCSE English and Maths) in 2022/23 showed an attainment gap of 27.2% in England, the widest since 2010/11 and not dissimilar from NI (at 25.8%).[10]

[9] NISRA Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School leavers 2022-23: NISRA School Leavers and DENI Infographics.
[10] UK State of the Nation: Social Mobility Commission: Attainment at age 16



Source: NISRA - Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2022-23

The attainment gap at A level which the *Independent Review of Education* argues is "widely regarded as a more valid measure of educational success"[11] is actually worsening. Data from the DENI[12] show that in 2018/19 a performance gap of 13 in 2018/19 rising to 15.6% in 2023/24 (Table 1).[13]

Table 1: Year 14 performance by entitlement status: 3+ A levels at grades A* - C

	2018/19	2023/24
Non-FSME	74.1%	73.8%
FSME	61.1%	58.3%
Attainment gap	13%	15.6%

Source: Examination performance at post-primary schools 2023/24 DENI

In short, the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and others remains a persistent problem. What can be done to address this issue?

[11] Independent Review of Education Vol 2:39
[12] Schools performance data
[13] Summary of Annual Examination Results (SAER) data collection was suspended in 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2022/23 figures were affected by CCEA's stepped back approach to pre-pandemic awarding standards and missing data due to action short of strike by teachers.

2 Existing Research

Given the enduring nature of the attainment gap, there has been existing research both on the causes of the problem and responses to it in Northern Ireland and beyond. In *New Decade, New Approach* (January 2020), two of the priorities under the broad heading 'transforming public services in a restored Executive' were:

- The Executive will **establish an external, independent review of education provision**, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and the prospects of moving towards a single education system.
- The Executive will establish an expert group to examine and propose an action plan to **address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background,** including the long-standing issues facing working-class, Protestant boys (emphasis is in the *New Decade, New Approach* report).[14 & 15]

The Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement began its work in September 2020 and reported in May 2021.[16] In the interim, the Northern Ireland Audit Office published a report (2021) entitled *Closing the Gap – social deprivation and links to educational attainment*.[17] The Audit Office focused on two DENI-funded interventions aimed at tackling the attainment gap: Targeting Social Need and Sure Start. The Audit Office findings were damning:

> Over £900 million of funding (for these two interventions) has not made any demonstrable difference in narrowing the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent counterparts… it is simply unacceptable that the Department (DENI) does not have

[14] New Decade, New Approach (2020): page 7.
[15] A report by Purdy et al (2022) argued that focusing on Protestant working-class boys was too narrow given the complexity of educational underachievement. The researchers highlighted: the diverse nature of educational underachievement; the disconnect between curriculum and assessment; and the potential for partnerships between schools, families and communities. Beyond the Stereotype
[16] Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement A Fair Start (2021)
[17] Northern Ireland Audit Office (2021) Closing the Gap

> adequate information to establish how these funds have been targeted by schools, or the effectiveness of the interventions used.[18]

It should be noted however that the findings of the NI Audit Office on *Sure Start* were at odds with those of the *Fair Start* report on this intervention. The latter "heard consistent messages in support of the Sure Start programme across disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland. In terms of targeted early years provision, the Sure Start programme supports families in areas of greatest disadvantage to help promote children's development from pregnancy to their fourth birthday." (Fair Start Main Report: page 9). Fair Start's criticism of TSN was that some schools were using the funding to support their operational tasks rather than directed spending on disadvantaged pupils.

The Audit Office did however acknowledge that a broad range of factors could impact on educational attainment including school leadership, classroom teaching, and parental and community involvement.

To tackle educational attainment demands an understanding of its causes. The Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement noted:

> Educational underachievement linked to economic disadvantage is an issue that has persisted for many years despite numerous policy interventions and significant financial investment by the Department of Education and others. Whilst some progress has been made, it is generally recognised that underachievement is due to its inextricable link with poverty in society, which is a much wider issue than education alone.[19]

The Expert Panel gathered data via an online consultation (n=401 responses) and found the perceived **causes** of educational underachievement were: family support and lack of role models (16.4%); multiple factors, a combination of social, economic and systemic issues (14.1%); and, poverty or socio-economic factors (12.6%).

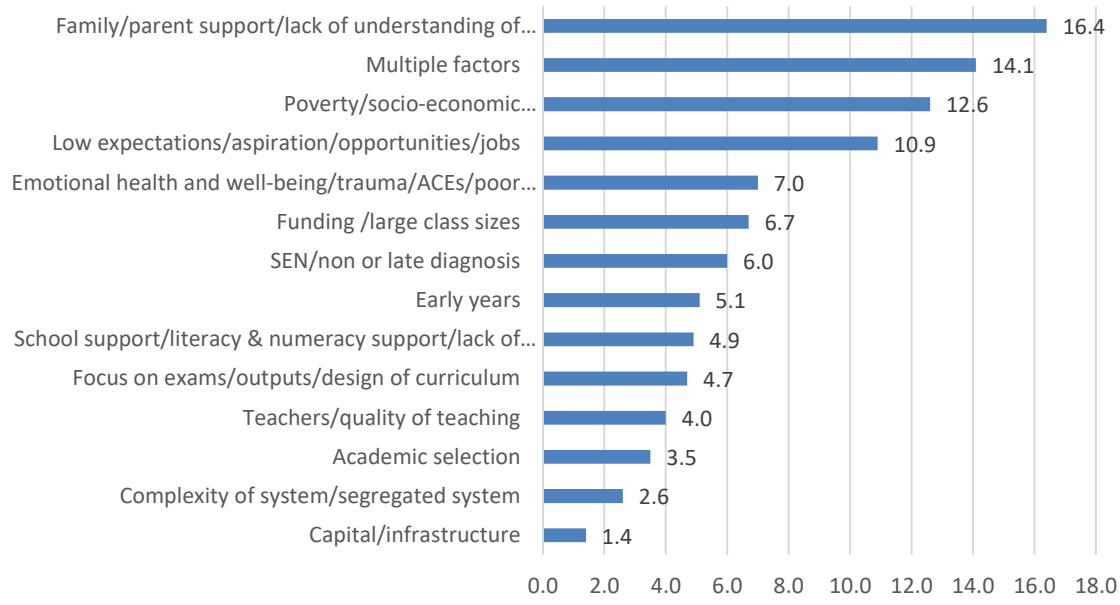
[18] Northern Ireland Audit Office Media Release Closing the Gap Press Release
[19] A Fair Start, Annex A, page 3 Annexes A-D

Survey respondents suggested that the **impacts** of educational underachievement were: lack of opportunities, poorly paid jobs (27.6%) and emotional health and well-being issues (17.9%).

The **most effective interventions** proposed were: greater family engagement (14.6%); raising aspirations (11.6%); and, a focus on early years development (10.5%).[20] Figure 3 displays the results in graph format.

One of the **main recommendations** arising from the *Fair Start* Report was to tackle underachievement through a new co-designed, whole community partnership approach which they called 'Reducing Educational Disadvantage' (RED programme) – or "building authentic partnerships between schools and communities using a place-based approach."[21] This recommendation informed DENI's most recent initiative, the RAISE programme.

Figure 3: What are the main causes of educational underachievement?



Source: A Fair Start (2021), Appendix C (pages 18 -23)
Note: the above findings are based on 1,539 responses to an on-line consultation conducted in September/October 2020. There is no suggestion that this is a representative sample.

[20] A Fair Start, Annex A, pages 20 -39 Annexes A-D
[21] A Fair Start: Promoting a Whole Community Approach to Education. A Fair Start Final Report and Action Plan (2021: 36)

A more detailed qualitative study of seven of the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland[22] was conducted by researchers at Queen's University and published in 2017.[23] The study found the following common factors at three levels (individual, school and policy) which **inhibited** educational achievement:

At Immediate (individual-home-community) level:

- Young people's mental health issues
- Adverse home conditions and inadequate levels of parental support
- Inter-generational transmission of educational failure
- Low self-esteem and aspirations of some young people

At School level:

- Low expectations on the part of some schools/ teachers
- Weak school-community linkages
- Perceptions of some schools as 'middle-class' and 'detached'
- High rates of absenteeism and exclusion in some schools
- Insufficient support for SEN and behavioural problems

At Structural/policy level:

- Current economic climate
- Legacies of the recent conflict
- Spatial detachment of schools and the communities they serve
- Variability in availability of quality pre-school provision
- Academic selection - negative effects

[22] Whiterock, The Diamond, Woodstock, Duncairn, Rosemount, Dunclug and Tullycarnet.
[23] Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation

The Queen's research also listed factors which **enhanced** educational achievements as follows:

At Immediate (individual-home-community) level:

- Individual resilience
- Parental support and encouragement
- Sense of connectedness to local community
- Local youth and community input

At School level:

- Visionary and collaborative leadership
- Effective school-community linkages and parental accessibility
- Provision of diverse curricula
- Positive teacher-pupil relationships
- Effective pastoral care and support for SEN pupils

At Structural/policy level:

- Collaborative and proactive community services
- New and Improved school buildings and facilities
- High attainment performance of those that attend grammar school

We expand on one of the factors in the Queen's report, absenteeism, as research indicates this to be a significant cause of low educational attainment.[24] Being in school is important to a child's achievement, wellbeing, and development. Evidence shows that the students with the highest attendance throughout their time in school gain the best GCSE and A Level results. Research also found that pupils who performed better both at the end of

[24] Why school attendance is so important

primary and secondary school missed fewer days than those who didn't perform as well.[25]

Absence is reported by schools in half-day sessions and recorded as authorised or unauthorised. The latest attendance figures available from DENI are 2021/22 data which show that for all schools, FSME pupils were absent for 13.1% of total half days compared with 8.4% for NFSME pupils, a gap of 4.7 percentage points (table 2).[26] The difference in absence rates was greatest in post primary schools where the absenteeism was 15.6% for FSME pupils and 9.6% for NFSME pupils, a difference of 6.0 percentage points.

Table 2: Absenteeism 2021/22

FSME	Percentage of total half days				
		Attended	**Overall absence**	**Authorised absence**	**Unauthorised absence**
Primary	FSME	88.7	11.3	7.2	4.1
	Non FSME	92.6	7.4	5.4	2.0
	Total	91.6	8.4	5.9	2.5
Post-primary	FSME	84.3	15.6	8.9	6.7
	Non FSME	90.4	9.6	6.4	3.2
	Total	89.0	11.0	7.0	4.0
Special	FSME	84.5	15.5	10.6	5.0
	Non FSME	84.4	15.6	9.9	5.7
	Total	84.4	15.6	10.2	5.3
All schools	FSME	86.9	13.1	8.0	5.1
	Non FSME	91.6	8.4	5.9	2.5
	Total	90.4	9.6	6.4	3.2

Source: DENI and NISRA Attendance Data 2021/22

Reasons given for absence were mainly: illness, medical/dental appointments, non-agreed family holidays. The proportion of absent half days for which no reason was provided represented 16.4% of absent half days in primary schools and 24.9% in post primary schools.

[25] Link between absence and attainment
[26] Attendance data 2021/22

Academic studies also provide a more detailed analysis of the link between attainment and socio-economic factors. In research using data from 22,764 school leavers in Northern Ireland which examined their educational outcomes, the findings were as follows:

- Girl school leavers significantly out-perform boys regardless of how deprived the areas in which they live.
- Catholic school leavers significantly out-perform Protestant school leavers regardless of how deprived the areas in which they live.
- Areas suffering from high levels of multiple deprivation have the lowest levels of educational performance, particularly marked amongst FSME male school leavers.
- The likelihood of good examination performance is highest amongst NFSME school leavers.
- The school leaver most likely to obtain good GCSEs is a NFSME, non-SEN, Catholic female from an area with low levels of deprivation.
- The school leaver least likely to obtain good GCSEs is a FSME, SEN Protestant male from an area with high levels of deprivation.[27]

Another study which combined data from the 2011 Census, school leavers survey and school census found that parental qualifications were the greatest socio-economic predictors of attainment. Parental occupation, in particular a mother's employment status, was associated with higher GCSE scores. This

[27] Borooah, V.K. and Knox, C., 2017. Inequality, segregation and poor performance: the education system in Northern Ireland. *Educational Review*, *69*(3), pp.318-336. Borooah & Knox article

indicated that parental socio-economic background is a key driver of attainment outcomes. Gender and school type were also key determinants of attainment.[28]

To put existing research outlined above into context, we set out performance results in 2023/24 which provide a snapshot of attainment levels at GCSE, showing the differences between attainment of FSME and NFSME pupils across different school types and by gender (Table 3).

The data show: girls out-perform boys across all school types; Catholic-Maintained non-grammar schools achieve significantly better results than Controlled non-grammar schools; FSME pupils (male and female) do not perform as well as their NFSME counterparts across different school types. FSME pupils (male and female) perform significantly better in grammar schools than the secondary sector, although not as well as their NFSME peers.

Table 3: Examination performance (year 12: 2023/24)			
Pupils gaining 5+ GCSEs at A* - C including English and Maths			
Male	70.6%		
Female	76.1%		
All Non-grammar	58.4%		
All Grammar Pupils	94.2%		
Controlled non-grammar	53.6%	Catholic-Maintained non-grammar	62.2%
Controlled grammar	96.8%	Voluntary grammar	91%
FSME, Male, Non-grammar	40.3%	NFSME, Male, Non-grammar	61.6%
FSME, Female, Non-grammar	47.4%	NFSME, Female, Non-grammar	69.5%
FSME, Male, Grammar	81.5%	NFSME, Male, Grammar	94.3%
FSME, Female, Grammar	87.0%	NFSME, Female, Grammar	97%

Source: data from DE Examination Performance in Year 12 & 14 Post-Primary Schools in NI 2023/24.[29]
Note: Caution should be exercised interpreting a snapshot of results from one year only.

[28] Early, E., Miller, S., Dunne, L. and Moriarty, J., 2023. The influence of socio-demographics and school factors on GCSE attainment: results from the first record linkage data in Northern Ireland. *Oxford Review of Education*, *49*(2), pp.171-189. Early et al article
[29] DE Schools Performance data 2023/24

3 Policy Responses to the Attainment Gap

The above research indicates broad agreement on the causes of educational underachievement. The critical question is what have been the policy responses aimed at tackling the problem? *The Independent Review of Education* listed several policies funded by DENI aimed at addressing educational disadvantage[30]: including *Targeting Social Need* (2005), *Extended Schools* (2006) and *Full-Service Programmes* (2006 & 2009), the *Pathway Fund* (2016), *Getting Ready to Learn* - early years (2017), and various initiatives arising from the implementation of the recommendations in *A Fair Start*. The Review noted that many of these are not core funded and are therefore susceptible to cuts when budgets are tight.

The ***Pathway Fund*** was introduced from 1 April 2016 and focuses on the provision of early years education and learning services for children aged 0-4 years. The funding is provided by DENI and administered under contract by Early Years, the Organisation for Young Children. The outcomes of the Pathway Fund are listed as: improved development of children who are at risk of not reaching their full educational potential, and an enhanced, more sustainable Early Years sector.[31] Progress reports on this intervention provide both process statistics and impact data. On the former, in 2023/24 funding amounted to £3.8m and benefitted some 10,700 children, half of whom were from the top quartile of disadvantage areas in Northern Ireland. Impact is self-reported by beneficiaries who indicated that between 75-80% of participating children from socially disadvantaged areas made good social and emotional, physical and cognitive progress.[32]

The ***Getting Ready to Learn*** programme aims to support pre-school education providers to encourage and develop parental involvement in children's early learning. It does this by engaging parents to create positive home environments and helping them to support their children's learning at home.[33] This

[30] Independent Review of Education Vol 2: 35
[31] The Pathways Fund
[32] Pathways Impact Report
[33] Getting Ready to Learn

intervention was part of a Northern Ireland Executive-Atlantic Philanthropies *Delivering Social Change Signature Project*[34] and involved several departments (the Department of Health, Department of Education, Department of Justice, Department for Communities, Department for the Economy) and The Atlantic Philanthropies. A key transformational element of the programme was collaboration across agencies and services.[35]

The ***Extended Schools Programme***, first launched in May 2006, was aimed at funding schools serving the most disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland.[36] The programme offers a wide range of services and activities outside normal school time to help meet the learning and development needs of pupils, their families and local communities. Typical activities include: breakfast and homework clubs, sport, arts & drama and ICT. There are also programmes for parents and families enabling schools to work closely with members of the wider community and connect local people with local services.[37] In 2022/23 some 479 schools (244,957 pupils) were eligible at a cost of £9.15m with funding going to health and fitness activities, literacy support and parenting and family assistance.[38]

The most recent Education Authority (EA) annual report (2022-23) on the programme concluded with affirmation that "the Extended Schools programme continues to provide much needed support to schools serving areas of disadvantage and, if anything, the need for such support to tackle educational underachievement is greater than ever."[39] The Extended Schools Programme has four programme outcomes[40] one of which is reducing underachievement.

[34] Delivering Social Change was set up in 2012 by the Northern Ireland Executive to tackle poverty and social exclusion by promoting joined-up working across government departments.
[35] Northern Ireland Executive
[36] Eligibility criteria for Extended School funding state that all schools are eligible if they have 51% or more of their pupils living in a Neighbourhood Renewal Area or 30% most deprived Super Output Areas AND/OR 37% or more of pupils on Free School Meal Entitlement: Extended Schools Entitlement 2018/19
[37] Extended Schools Programme
[38] EA Extended School Programme Annual Report 2022-23
[39] EA Extended School Programme Annual Report 2022-23
[40] The Extended Schools Programme has four programme outcomes: reducing underachievement; fostering health and well-being and social inclusion; improving life chances; and developing integrated delivery of support and services.

In 2022-23 89% of the schools involved self-reported 'strong' or 'some' evidence that the programme improved attainment. The EA note that as hardship challenges become more acute, budget pressures mean that some valuable services delivered under *Extended Schools* will be discontinued.

The ***Full-Service Programmes*** are closely linked with the *Extended Schools Programme*. These are described by DENI as "going beyond extended school provision by delivering substantial additional programmes and activities aimed at tackling barriers to learning and raising levels of educational attainment for those pupils in greatest need".[41] The programme aims to tackle a range of physical, emotional, social and health needs of children and encourages stronger links with parents and communities to support children readiness to learn. DENI, through the EA and CCMS, support a full-service programmes in two communities experiencing high levels of deprivation: Boys' Model and Model School for Girls in North Belfast (since 2006); and Ballymurphy area of West Belfast (since 2009).

These schools can access comprehensive specialist support services (such as health) for pupils, parents, families and the wider community. In 2023/24 DE provided £366k in support of each programme. It is difficult to compare these two interventions as the Model schools' programme focuses on two post primary schools while the West Belfast programme covers six nursery schools, two nursery units, six primary schools and four post-primary schools. The outcomes are also self-reported and tend to be very positive about the achievements.[42] However, the Model schools' report notes that "while attainment is not a full-service extended school pillar, pupil outcomes provide key evidence of the success/impact of the programme".[43] This seems at odds with the DE's objective (stated above) for these programmes 'to raise levels of educational attainment for those pupils in greatest need'. Given that this intervention is billed as closely linked to the Extended Schools intervention

[41] Full-Service Programmes
[42] West Belfast Full Service Report and Model Schools Report
[43] Model Schools Report page 42.

which has reducing under achievement as one of its outcome, one would imagine that this is central to the programme.

We set out below attainment data on the six schools involved in full-service interventions (table 4). Caution should be exercised in interpreting these data as they do not cover the full range of support provided by these schools (e.g. no attainment data are available on nursery units or primary schools). Both programmes self-assess the benefits of the interventions highly.[44]

Table 4 : Schools' performance in Full Service Programme

School	Number of pupils	% FSME	School performance 2022/23: 5+ GCSEs A*-C with English and Maths[45]
Colaiste Feirste	884	48%	48%
St Louise's	1,548	56%	67%
All Saints	858	69%	Not reported
De La Salle	753	57%	61%
Belfast Boys' Model	1,104	54%	53%
Belfast Model School for Girls	1,085	55%	67%

Source: data extracted from DE Schools-Plus database.[46]

Targeting Social Need (TSN) is another key intervention which, according to DENI, is allocated as part of schools' core budget "in recognition of the additional challenges and costs involved in supporting children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as those at risk of educational underachievement."[47] There is considerable flexibility in the way in which TSN funding can be used based on school identified priorities. The programme provided some £70m+ funding each year through TSN to nursery (n=194), primary (n=840) and post-primary (n=215) schools in 2023/24.[48] Impact is evaluated through self-reported data from schools. The 2023/24 report shows

[44] West Belfast Full Service Report and Model Schools Report
[45] The NI secondary schools average performance (5+ GCSEs A*-C) with English and Maths = 65%
[46] DE Schools-Plus
[47] Targeting Social Need
[48] TSN Planner Report 2023/24

that under the objective of 'attainment' some 133 targets were assessed (in each school) with an average impact score 4.1 from an overall score of 5.[49]

A RaISe research report in (December 2023) noted that 'despite various policy initiatives, evidence suggests this has not led to significant improvements in closing the gap' in educational outcomes.'[50]

4 A Fair Start

In July 2020 the (then) Minister of Education (Peter Weir) set up an Expert Panel to examine educational disadvantage as a commitment made from the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement. Its terms of reference included: to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background (with a particular consideration given to working-class Protestant boys) and a costed action plan to address the problem.[51]

The Expert Panel produced a final report and action plan in May 2021 entitled *A Fair Start*.[52] The report suggested a focus on eight broad areas as follows:

1. **Redirecting the Focus to Early Years**: Enhance investment in early childhood education to ensure all children receive a strong foundation. Expand access to quality pre-school education, particularly in disadvantaged areas.
2. **Championing Emotional Health and Wellbeing**: Implement programmes that support the mental health and emotional resilience of students. Provide training for educators to identify and address emotional and psychological needs.
3. **Ensuring the Relevance and Appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment**: Review and adapt the curriculum to meet the diverse needs of all learners. Develop assessment methods that accurately reflect student abilities and progress.

[49] TSN Planner Report 2023/24
[50] Addressing the Attainment Gap in Northern Ireland ((Niamh Devlin and Sinead McMurray): NIAR-2023
[51] Fair Start Terms of Reference
[52] A Fair Start

4. **Promoting a Whole Community Approach to Education**: Foster collaboration between schools, families, and communities to support student learning. Encourage community involvement in educational initiatives and decision-making processes.
5. **Maximising Boys' Potential**: Address specific challenges faced by boys, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, to improve their educational outcomes. Implement targeted interventions to engage and motivate male students.
6. **Driving Forward Teachers' Professional Learning**: Provide continuous professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their skills. Encourage reflective practice and the adoption of innovative teaching methods.
7. **Supporting the Professional Learning and Wellbeing of School Leadership**: Offer leadership development programs for school principals and senior staff. Promote the wellbeing of school leaders to ensure effective management and a positive school environment.
8. **Ensuring Interdepartmental Collaboration and Delivery**: Establish mechanisms for coordinated efforts among various government departments and agencies. Ensure that policies and initiatives are aligned to effectively address educational underachievement.

The DENI responded by endorsing the report's recommendations and initiating several policy measures on early years education, enhancing literacy and numeracy through a *Delivering Social Change* literacy and numeracy signature programme.[53] Their response included an independent review of DENI funded targeted early years interventions including *Sure Start*, the *Pathway Fund* and *Toybox Project*. The *Fair Start Report* recommended a budget of £180m over five years to deliver their recommendations but the DENI allocated only £2.5m in 2023/24 (rather than a suggested £21m) due to budget challenges.[54] DENI committed to provide regular progress reports to the Northern Ireland Assembly, detailing advancements and challenges in implementing the action plan. The

[53] Delivering Social Change
[54] Education funding shortfall: BBC

first such report was submitted in June 2022 when the (then) Minister for Education (Michelle McIlveen) stated:

> I held a number of meetings with Ministerial colleagues last year to discuss the value and significance of this report and the need to support its delivery by continuing to provide for the necessary funding in future years. Collaboration lies at the heart of the 'A Fair Start' Report.[55]

Despite these efforts, challenges persist, particularly concerning funding constraints and the need for a sustained commitment to fully realise the report's recommendations.

The Minister (Paul Givan) subsequently announced the RAISE programme (31 May 2024) with a budget of £20m over the next two years described as a 'whole community and place-based approach'.[56] Criteria for funding within this programme have been controversial as it moved beyond traditional FSME eligibility to include data on: GCSEs, absenteeism, SEN pupils, FSME, multiple deprivation indices (income deprivation affecting children and health deprivation and disability), and crime-anti-social behaviour incidents.[57]

5 The Independent Review of Education

The *Independent Review of Education* (2023) was initiated as a key commitment within the *New Decade, New Approach Agreement* (2020) in recognition of the need to reform and improve the education system, particularly around issues of underfunding, special education needs, curriculum and assessment, governance and collaboration. It also considered socio-economic and educational disadvantage in some detail in its research and concluded that "socio-economic disadvantage has a significant deleterious impact on the education and subsequent life chances of many young people. Reducing its effect must be a priority."[58] There are several points worthy of further consideration from the Independent Review.

[55] Minister McIlveen (then Education Minister) to Northern Ireland Assembly 29th July 2022: Progress Report on Fair Start
[56] RAISE programme
[57] RAISE programme
[58] Independent Review of Education Vol 2:41

First, the Review highlighted the fact that grammar schools have many fewer pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, who need additional resources and support, than non-selective schools, which contributes to higher attainment levels in the former.

Second, although the emphasis is on socio-economic factors which contribute to underachievement, there are also gender differences with working-class boys achieving lower attainment rates.

Third, there are some schools (13 schools at GCSE and 10 schools at A level) with a very high number (greater than 50%) of FSME pupils, who perform above the sectoral average both at GCSE and A levels. Although there are relatively few of these schools (23 from 192 post-primary schools overall) who successfully tackle the disadvantage-attainment gap, they provide real learning opportunities for others to follow.

An early example of shared learning is the DENI's *Tackling Educational Underachievement Sharing Best Practice Conference* (2017) which provided lessons from the Colin Neighbourhood partnership, Manchester Communications Academy, Queen's University and Save the Children.[59] In addition, the DENI produced a useful good practice guidance based on eight post-primary schools with a high number of FSME pupils and good examination results.

The case studies identified ten features which produced good educational outcomes for schools with a high number of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds:

- Strong, committed and visible leadership.
- Committed teachers and staff.
- High expectations of and aspirations for all pupils.
- Effective pastoral care and positive behavioural management.
- Broad and balanced curriculum with a focus on literacy and numeracy.
- Skilled use of data to track pupil performance.

[59] Best Practice Conference

- Cross-phase links to support transition and to identify, apply and share best practice.
- Effective use of outside interventions.
- Good links with parents, communities and employers.
- A well-informed and skilled Board of Governors committed to supporting the school.[60]

The Independent Review noted:

> There is no "silver bullet" when it comes to reducing the educational effect of disadvantage. Ultimately, it is essential that all learners be provided with the conditions where they can remain engaged and thrive in education.[61]

Minister of Education, Paul Givan, has set out his priorities in response to the Independent Review as follows:

> I have set out, as a first phase of reform, a vision for educational excellence based on a renewal of curriculum, assessment, qualifications and school improvement with a relentless focus on tackling disadvantage. These elements, together, form the cornerstone of our education system.[62]

There are limited references in the *Draft Programme for Government 2024-27* to tackling educational disadvantage, save for a pledge that "you will get the support you need at every stage of your life by removing barriers to education and employment, taking action to address poverty, and improving access to the services people depend upon."[63] The draft programme refers to a £20m investment fund "to deliver innovative and community informed approaches to raising achievement and reducing educational disadvantage", the details of which are unclear at this stage.[64] There is however one metric in the *Programme for Government Wellbeing Framework* which will track progress on

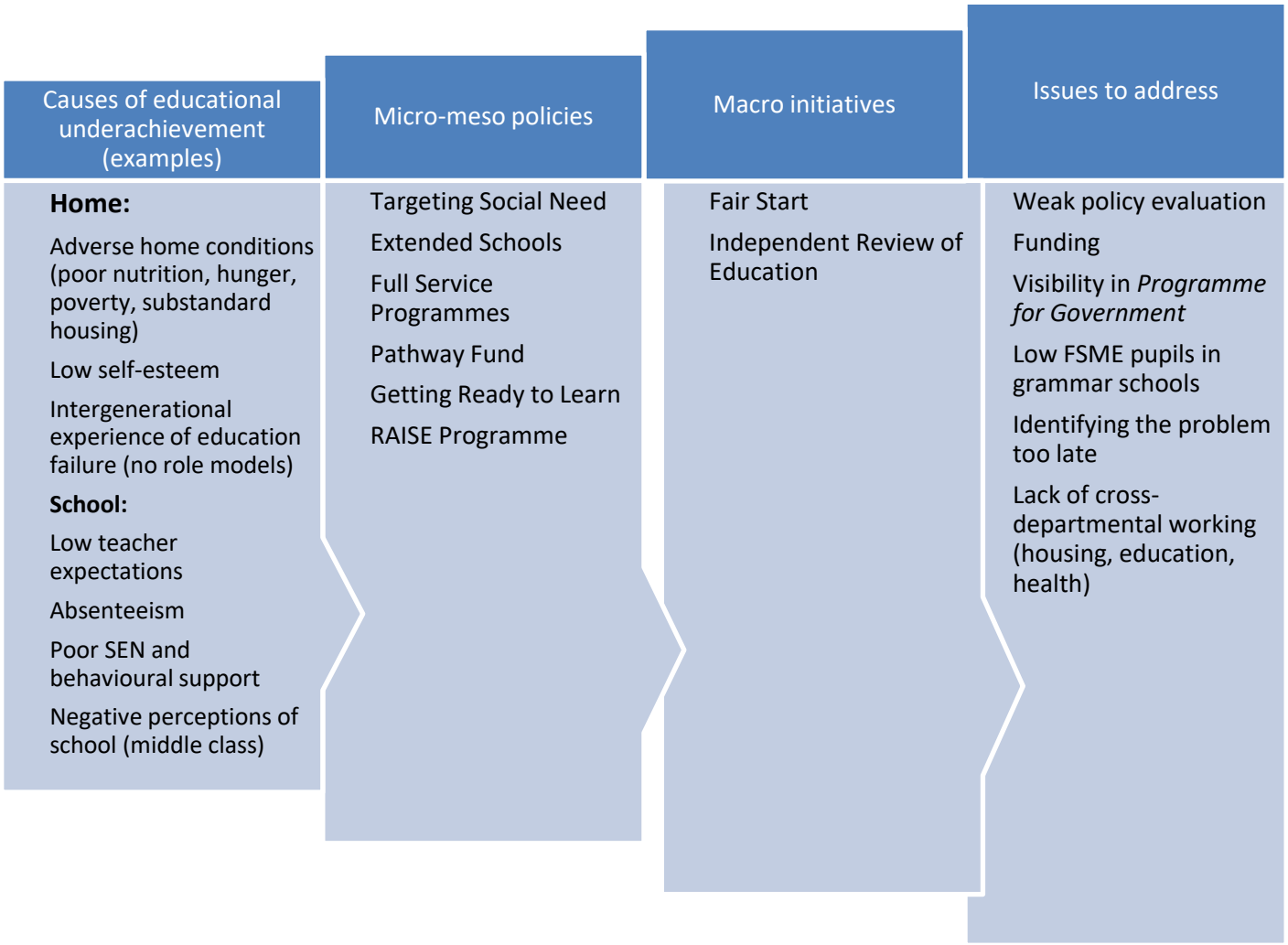
[60] Tackling Educational Disadvantage
[61] Independent Review of Education Vol 2: 62
[62] Education Minister's statement on Independent Review of Education: Official Report: Monday 21 October 2024.
[63] Doing What matters Most page 7.
[64] Doing What matters Most page 17

tackling the attainment gap: school leavers attainment gap or the gap between the percentage of NFSME school leavers and the percentage of FSME school leavers achieving at level 2 or above including GCSE English and maths.[65]

We summarise the causes of educational underachievement, micro-meso policies aimed at addressing the problem, macro initiatives, and issues which remain to be addressed in Figure 4 below.

[65] PfG Wellbeing framework

Figure 4: Educational Underachievement



6 Other Jurisdictions

Given the different education system, structures and assessment frameworks in Ireland and the rest of the UK, it is difficult to make direct comparisons with educational disadvantage in Northern Ireland. However, it is interesting to learn how other jurisdictions are addressing the same policy issue.

6.1 England

Table 5: Attainment in England 2021/22				
2021/22		Disadvantaged	Not known to be in disadvantage	Attainment gap
Aged 11	% of pupils reaching expected standards in reading writing and maths at KS 2	43%	66%	23%
Aged 16	% of pupils achieving grade five or above in English and Maths GCSEs	30%	57%	27%

Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation Joseph Rowntree Foundation UK Poverty 2023

England is experiencing the same problem of persistent educational disadvantage (Table 5). On average, disadvantaged pupils (those eligible for Free School Meals) are 10 months behind their peers by the end of primary school and 19 months behind by the end of secondary school. Differentiating further, pupils who are persistently disadvantaged (eligible for free school meals for at least 80% of their time in schools) are nearly 12 months behind at primary school and 24 months at secondary school.[66]

[66] Jon Andrews and Robbie Cruikshanks (2024) *Tackling the persistent disadvantage gap*: A new approach to deprivation funding: Education Policy Institute Report

At all phases of schooling, the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils has grown since the pandemic.[67 & 68]As of 2024, it is the widest in a decade for 11–16-year-olds, and remains higher than pre-pandemic levels for 5-year-olds.[69] The gap continues to widen at key stage 4 (school leaving age), and while the attainment gap for those finishing primary school narrowed slightly in the past year, it remains wider than it was a decade ago.[70 & 71]

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IfS) estimated that, in the academic year 2022/23, less than half of disadvantaged pupils are meeting expectations in reading, writing and maths at the end of primary school. At GCSE level, 43% of FSME pupils earn a standard pass (grade 4) in English and Maths, compared with 72% of their more affluent peers.[72] Only 29% of FSME pupils at age 15 later progressed to university, compared with 49% of their better-off peers.[73]

The pupil premium is additional funding provided to state-funded schools in England to help disadvantaged pupils of all abilities to achieve their full potential. The pupil premium is not a personal budget for individual pupils. Schools have flexibility in how they spend the funding but must demonstrate how it supports disadvantaged pupils. Examples include: targeted academic support (extra tuition, small group tuition); personal development (mental health support); enrichment opportunities (trips, clubs); and staff training.[74]

The National Foundation for Educational Research conducted research in primary, secondary and special schools across England which were identified as making 'more or less progress than expected' in tackling educational disadvantage. Researchers found the following factors as the most effective ways to support disadvantaged pupils' achievement:

[67] Hobbs, A. & Mutebi, N. (2021). Inequalities in education and attainment gaps. *Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology*.
[68] Inequalities and attainment gap
[69] Education Policy Institute (2024). Social Mobility and Vulnerable Learners Annual Report 2024.
[70] National Audit Office (2024). Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children
[71] Education Policy Institute (2023). Annual Report.
[72] Institute for Fiscal Studies (2024). The state of education: what awaits the next government?
[73] DfE (2023). Widening participation in higher education.
[74] Pupil Premium

1. Whole school ethos of attainment for all: most successful schools have an ethos of high attainment for all pupils and avoid stereotyping disadvantaged pupils by referring to them as a group.

2. Addressing behaviour and attendance: pupils have to be in school and able to pay attention before they can access learning. More successful schools have effective behaviour strategies and rapid response systems to address poor attendance.

3. High quality teaching for all: there should be a consistently high standard of teaching tailored to suit the needs of their pupils ("for poor pupils, the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher is a whole year's learning"[75]).

4. Meeting individual learning needs: provide targeted support for under-performing pupils during curriculum time, as well as providing learning support outside school hours.

5. Deploy staff effectively: deploy the best teachers to work with pupils who need the most support and ensure teaching assistants are well trained in supporting specific learning interventions.

6. Data driven and responding to evidence: use data to identify pupils' learning needs at every opportunity including regular reviews of progress to spot early signs of underperformance which should be addressed quickly.

7. Clear, responsive leadership: ensure staff are willing to do whatever it takes to help each pupil to succeed and hold them to account for pupils' progress. Train staff to provide pupils with high quality feedback and, in turn, provide good feedback to staff on their performance.[76]

[75] Sutton Trust: Impact of teachers on pupil achievement
[76] Supporting the attainment of disadvantaged pupils

Recent research has argued that the current national funding formula and pupil premium does not target pupils who are persistently disadvantaged and called for the savings used from falling pupil numbers to increase support for this group via an uplift in the pupil premium rates.[77] A key recommendation from the research was to coordinate efforts beyond schools – work with other government sectors to tackle poverty, improve housing, and expand health care access, especially mental health services.[78]

6.2 Scotland

Table 6: Attainment in Scotland 2021/22				
2021/22		Most deprived 20% of areas (%)	Least deprived 20% of areas (%)	Attainment gap
Aged 11	% of primary 7 achieving literacy	56	80	24%
Aged 11	% of primary 7 achieving numeracy	62	85	23%
Aged 16-18	One or more at SCGF at level five on leaving school	78	96	18%

Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation Joseph Rowntree Foundation UK Poverty 2023

Scotland has an overarching framework for closing the attainment gap (table 6) entitled *Scottish Attainment Challenge 2022/23 – 2025/26* with a budget of £1 billion and a mission to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty. Tackling the attainment gap received significant political importance in Scotland when the (then) First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, told the Scottish National Party in 2015 that she wanted to be judged on closing the attainment gap.[79] There are a number of initiatives which sit within this overall framework. These include *Pupil Equity Funding* which provides schools with funds to help close the poverty-related attainment gap based on local approaches consistent with the needs of pupils. The funding is

[77] Education Policy Institute Report
[78] Education attainment gap
[79] The SNP's 2016 Programme for Government pledged to "substantially eliminate [the attainment gap] within a decade". Education was the "defining mission" of Ms Sturgeon's government, the party said. BBC Scotland

spent at the discretion of the head-teachers working in partnership with each other and their local authority. *Strategic Equity Funding* is distributed to 32 local authorities in Scotland based on data about children in low-income families. The government also invests in early years education by support towards childcare costs for children from low-income families.[80]

Scotland evaluates the effectiveness of interventions made by schools via the *National Improvement Framework* which collects information on school leadership, teacher professionalism, parental engagement, assessment of children's progress; school improvement; and performance toward the priorities of the national improvement framework.

School improvement data are based on information from both school inspection reports and schools' self-evaluations where: learning, teaching and assessment; and raising attainment and achievement, is graded 'good' or 'better'. The level of attendance and number of exclusions from school is also collated as a metric in the assessment of attainment levels.[81]

However, the Scottish Qualifications Authority results for 2024 show that exam results for 2024 have led to overall A-C pass rates for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher dropping across the board when compared with 2023.[82] Importantly, the attainment gap at: National 5 was 17.2% compared with 15.6% in 2023; Higher was 17.2% compared to 16% in 2023; and Advanced Higher was 15.5% compared with 11.5% in 2023. In short, pass rates dropped while the attainment gap widened.

[80] Pupil attainment: closing the gap
[81] National improvement framework: drivers of improvement
[82] Scotland: National 5 is equivalent GCSE; Higher is equivalent to GCE AS and A Levels; Advanced Higher is equivalent to HNC.

6.3 Wales

Table 7: Attainment in Wales 2021/22				
2021/22		FSM (%)	Non-FSM (%)	Attainment gap
Aged 16	% of GCSE entries awarded A* - C	53	80	27%

Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation Joseph Rowntree Foundation UK Poverty 2023

The Welsh Government is also struggling in its attempts to tackle education disadvantage (table 7). Before the pandemic, the Education and Training Inspectorate for Wales reported that the 'poverty gap' between FSME pupils' and NFSME pupils' attainment had not narrowed over the previous decade and typically widened as pupils became older. The Inspectorate reported in 2022 & 2023 that the pandemic had exacerbated attainment gaps and disproportionately affected pupils from deprived backgrounds.[83]

In fact, Wales faces a larger challenge than England. A research report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that the gap in GCSE results between disadvantaged and other pupils in Wales is 22-23 months in 2019 and had changed little since 2009. Across England and Wales, the lowest performances for disadvantaged pupils are practically all in Wales.[84] There were many areas in England with higher or similar levels of poverty to local areas in Wales but with significantly higher GCSE results for disadvantaged pupils (Liverpool, Gateshead and Barnsley).

The metrics for Wales illustrate the poverty gap. The 'capped 9' indicator looks at the grades for a pupil's top nine subjects, including literacy, numeracy and science. Points are awarded with an average points score overall at 365.5. In 2018/19 the gap between scores on nine subjects between FSME pupils and NFSME pupils was 77.3 points. In 2022/23 it was 88.7 points.[85]

When it comes to GCSE grades, *Qualifications Wales* figures show that 8.3% of grades were the top A and A* for FSME pupils, compared to 24.1% NFSME

[83] Tackling the impact of poverty and disadvantage
[84] Major challenges for education in Wales
[85] Stats Wales Examination database

pupils. The gap has widened from 14 points before the pandemic to 15.7 in 2023.

For NFSME pupils, 70% of the grades were C or above, compared to 41.6% of those who were eligible. That gap has also grown slightly since 2019.[86]

The Welsh Government has a number of policies in place to tackle education disadvantage. The *Pupil Development Grant* (£130m each year) is available to children and young people in receipt of free school meals, those in care and other-than-at school settings.[87] The grant can be used for a variety of purposes including school uniform, equipment, and access to the arts. The *Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards* programme invites teachers into schools to provide in-depth support for those who have specific challenges. In addition, the Welsh Government has prioritised the need to address socio-economic inequality through legislation. The *Socio-Economic Duty (Welsh Government, 2020)* makes addressing the impact of poverty a statutory duty for local authorities.[88] The Equality and Human Rights Commission, in its role as the regulator of the 2010 Equality Act has powers to promote and provide advice and guidance, and publish research, on implementing the socio-economic duty.

Notwithstanding the Welsh Government efforts, the Wales Education and Training Inspectorate highlights several ways to mitigate the impacts of poverty on educational attainment. These included:

- The need to improve pupil attendance for pupils eligible for free school meals. The proportion of sessions missed in the academic year 2022-23 was 20.6% for FSME pupils against 10.2% for NFSME pupils.
- School leaders did not consider well enough how effective teaching could reduce the impact of poverty and the need to minimise barriers to learning. Professional development of teachers was therefore seen as essential in schools with a high number of disadvantaged pupils.

[86] Pupil gaps widen
[87] Improving standards and tackling inequalities
[88] Wales: The Socio-economic Duty

- Government and school leaders did not evaluate sufficiently well the funding allocated under the *Pupil Development Grant* and its impact on educational attainment. Research evidence was therefore limited on how best to address the effects of poverty on educational attainment.[89]

6.4 Republic of Ireland

The Department of Education implements the *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools Programme (DEIS)* which brings a number of pre-existing initiatives, aimed at improving opportunities for those at risk and disadvantage and social exclusion, together under a composite framework. The Plan has been the Irish Department of Education's main policy initiative since 2005 to respond to educational disadvantage. The overall vision in the plan is twofold: to equip learners to break cycles of disadvantage and participate fully in society; and to improve literacy and numeracy, retention rates, and access to higher education.[90]

Examples of some of the initiatives are: *Early Start*, a one-year preventative intervention scheme for pre-school children (3 to 5 years old) who are at risk of not reaching their potential in school. It is available in selected schools in some disadvantaged areas. The *School Completion Programme* aimed at children in primary and post-primary school who are at risk of leaving school early, or who are out of school and haven't transferred to another learning site. The *Hot School Meals Programme* available to all primary schools from April 2025 and a new school meals holiday hunger pilot to be introduced in summer 2025.[91]

In a major review (2024) of resourcing primary and post-primary schools to address educational disadvantage, the OECD found that the socio-economic gap in educational attainment was narrower than the average across OECD countries. Despite this, outcomes persist in the Republic of Ireland for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The report made a number of recommendations to include the following:

[89] Mitigating the impacts of poverty on educational attainment
[90] Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
[91] Measures to address educational disadvantage.

- Strengthen the coordination and integration of services across departments to better support students at risk of educational disadvantage.
- Promote further the sharing of good practices in the education system and across schools in the area of educational disadvantage.
- Continue refining and validating the indicator(s) of social disadvantage underpinning the targeting of DEIS resources.
- Prepare the periodic updating of the indicators of social disadvantage to develop a more dynamic resource allocation model.
- Address staff shortages through targeted efforts to attract and retain diverse professionals for a career in disadvantaged schools.
- Review additional costs of education to families to improve the accessibility of provisions.[92]

Given the different education system in Ireland, it is difficult to make direct comparison with attainment levels in the UK. However, research by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI, 2019) found that across the European Union-27 countries, 19% of those who experienced childhood poverty attained third level education in adulthood, while it was 44% among those who grew up in more advantaged financial circumstances. The respective figures for Ireland were 39% and 71%. Ireland has one of the lowest levels of inequality among the EU-27 with respect to obtaining third level education, though the gap is still substantial.[93]

In a follow-on report by the ESRI (2022) researchers concluded:

> Both systems (Republic of Ireland and NI) face challenges in tackling educational disadvantage. Stakeholders across the island spoke of the benefits of the DEIS programme in Ireland and those in NI felt that such a programme could be useful for dealing with educational inequality in NI.[94]

Importantly, the research highlighted that early school leaving is two to three times higher in Northern Ireland compared to Ireland and this gap has widened

[92] OECD Review: Addressing educational disadvantage.
[93] ESRI Childhood Poverty .
[94] ESRI educational outcomes in Ireland and Northern Ireland

over time. The proportion of 16-24-year-olds who leave school with, at most, a lower secondary qualification is 14% in NI compared to 6% in Ireland. These school leavers are more likely to be unemployed or work in low wage jobs. Pupils from the more disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be early school leavers in Northern Ireland than in Ireland.[95] The research concluded with a call for greater cooperation across the island of Ireland as the education systems faced similar challenges in particular tackling educational disadvantage and promoting social inclusion of students with special educational needs. In short, a dedicated composite programme such as the DEIS appears to offer valuable lessons in tackling the attainment gap in all regions of the UK.

7 Conclusions

The above research gives rise to several observations (in no order of importance) on educational underachievement in Northern Ireland.

Tackling the attainment gap is hampered by short-term funded initiatives through a range of eclectic approaches which suggests there is no clear public policy logic model which effectively tracks inputs, process, outputs and outcomes. As a result, new initiatives (such as the proposed RAISE programme) are experimental with no *a priori* guarantee of success. Evaluation of existing interventions can also be inconsistent. The NI Audit Office Report was highly critical of TSN, yet self-reported schools' assessments praised the programme (an impact score of 4.1 out of 5).

Despite the significance of educational underachievement, it receives scant attention in the *Draft Programme for Government 2024-27* and accompanying *Well-Being Framework* where there is only one target (school leavers attainment gap) to address the issue. Although the gap may appear to be narrowing (29.5 points in 2017/18 to 25.8 points in 2022/23), these statistics could well have been positively impacted by COVID and the gap is actually increasing at A level (13 points in 2017/18 to 15.6 points in 2022/23). In addition to the absence of a PfG imperative on

[95] ESRI educational outcomes in Ireland and Northern Ireland

underachievement, the lack of funding for the implementation of the *Fair Start's* recommendations does not augur well in tackling the attainment gap.

There is clearly a problem that grammar schools are not taking a fair share of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (12.7% of FMSE pupils compared to 34.9% FSME pupils in secondary non-grammar), in part as a result of the transfer tests and low aspirations amongst some primary schools, which simply compounds the inequality in attainment levels.[96] Yet we know (table 3) that FSME pupils perform significantly better in grammar schools than non-grammar schools although not as well as their NFSME counterparts in both school types. We also know that CCMS non-grammar schools (with a high percentage of FSME pupils) perform significantly better at GCSE level than non-grammar control sector (62.2% and 53.6% respectively). This creates an opportunity for shared learning.

The Millenium Cohort Study found that children born at the start of the new millennium had lower attainment in cognitive tests in their early years if their parents had lower incomes. The gap in vocabulary development between children in the richest and poorest families (top and bottom 20% of household incomes) was, on average, 10 months at age three and 15 months at age five.[97] This gap continues through Key Stage 3 (ages 10-14) and Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16), at which point pupils take their GCSE qualifications. In Northern Ireland the attainment gap is not captured until KS4. Research tells us that this is much too late and therefore means that policies to tackle underachievement lag behind the pupils' experiences to that point. Patterns of poor attendance have become embedded by KS4 which is hugely detrimental to educational performance.

The use of GCSE metrics to capture the performance gap makes for a useful comparator across school management types. However, the impact of disadvantage occurs much earlier in the school cycle and yet there are no metrics reported at KS 1 & 2 given that primary school assessment is based on using levels of progression

[96] FSME by school management type
[97] Intergenerational Inequality

rather than standardised tests. Existing research demonstrates that attainment gap begins at an early age and continues through the different stages of the child's education.

Finally, much of the research recommends cross-departmental involvement in tackling underachievement given the multiple issues faced by children from deprived backgrounds. Yet trying to achieve this in practice has proved very difficult. While the spirit of collaboration may be well-intentioned by government officials, their accountability structures are vertical (to the Minister) rather than horizontal to other departments. The needs of disadvantaged pupils do not synchronise well with departmental structures and lines of accountability.