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# Lessons Learnt?

Reflecting on 20 years of school  
reform in England





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# Executive summary

## Changes over time

### School spending

- Spending per pupil in schools rose in the early 2000s, levelling off in 2009 before broadly falling in the decade between 2010 and 2020. Since then, spending has increased, but by 2024 spending was still lower in real terms than it had been back in 2010. School capital spending has fallen over the same time period, creating a large backlog in maintenance spending.
- Post-16 education has seen some of the largest budget cuts in education, with spending on colleges down 10% between 2010 and 2024, and sixth forms down 23%. During the same period, there has been a fall in teaching time post-16, and a fall in the number of qualifications taken.
- Teacher salaries saw a real terms pay cut between 2007 and 2021, with a large part of this fall due to pay freezes and caps implemented between 2010 and 2014. In more recent years, starting and early career salaries have improved, but have still seen a 4-5% real terms fall since 2007. For more experienced teachers, this fall has been even greater, at 8%. Subsequent teacher pay rises in 2022 and 2023 were also below inflation, although the most recent pay rise in 2024 was above current recent lower levels of inflation.

### Policy changes

- The establishment of multi-academy trusts (MATs) has been one of the major policy changes of the last 20 years, with responsibility for many schools moved away from local authorities (LAs) and into these bodies. While some MATs have been highly successful, others have struggled.

- The last 20 years have also seen changes in accountability mechanisms for schools, with a much more aggressive approach first introduced by New Labour and continued under subsequent governments. However, over time schools have inevitably looked to game the metrics, and as budgets have been squeezed, these accountability measures have been tougher for schools to handle.
- The pandemic has been a major challenge for schools since 2020, with children missing prolonged periods in the classroom, and considerable variability in access to home learning. The crisis highlighted some of the challenges in the current system, including the DfE struggling to manage such a centralised system (as a result of the shift to MATs) during a time of crisis.
- There was a major focus on socio-economic disadvantage from the New Labour government in the early 2000s, into the 2010s with the Coalition (including the introduction of the Pupil Premium, to target funds at lower income students), and initially with the 2015 Conservative government. However, in the final years of the Conservative government there was a reversal of this focus, with changes to the funding formula directing funding to schools with better-off intakes, and a failure of pupil premium funding to keep pace with inflation.

## Outcomes

### Overall

- National and international referencing tests are the best data available to look at changes in standards over time. Broadly, over the last two decades England's performance on these tests in English and reading has remained relatively steady or shown some improvement (although with a drop off post pandemic, and similarly has found either steady performance or improvements in maths, but again with a drop, although smaller than that seen in English, post pandemic.) This drop off seems to have been less severe than in most other countries.

- On science, there is evidence for a fall in performance over this period in international tests, potentially due to the removal of external assessments for science at KS2.
- England is a strong performer internationally. In the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), for reading England is the highest performing European country. And for maths – for the 10-year-old cohort – it is second only to Northern Ireland. In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), England is also one of the highest performing European countries, although in large part due to a greater drop off in performance in other Western European countries, rather than improved performance here.

### **Young people from low-income families**

- Despite a major focus on disadvantage throughout the New Labour and Coalition years, in the last 20 years, looking at changes between groups using KS2 and GCSE data, there has been no real progress in closing the attainment gap between lower income young people (as measured by free school meal eligibility) and their better-off peers.
- Looking at a wider group of young people who were eligible for free school meals at any point in the last 6 years, there had been some progress in closing the gap pre-covid, perhaps showing some signs of progress on the focus on disadvantaged young people, but the pandemic has led to a loss of all the gains made since 2011.
- These challenges stand alongside wider issues related to child poverty, with relative child poverty falling in the UK before 2010, before following a broadly upward trend until 2020. During the pandemic, relative child poverty fell sharply (in part due to some falling middle incomes combined with government interventions, such as the furlough scheme, to support those on low incomes) before rising sharply again after the crisis. Overall, no progress has been made in reducing child poverty over the last decade, and there is evidence the numbers in severe poverty have increased.

## Wider challenges

- Over this period, teachers have increasingly taken on work to provide wider social and emotional support to students as services provided by other agencies have been cut.
- Rates of pupils with Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs) for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have increased significantly over the last decade. For example, the number of young people with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) for autism has more than doubled to over 130k since 2015. Wider support services have struggled to meet demand, with more educated parents and those with financial resources better able to fight to secure support for their children.
- Mental health issues for young people have also increased considerably over the last 20 years, an ongoing crisis which needs urgent attention from government.

# Going forward - open questions for government

- The new government faces an array of challenges across almost every policy area, including across the school system. However, due to both the wider economic situation and political choices made by the new government, very little money is available to pay for solutions. **It is hard to see how many of the challenges schools face – from teacher recruitment through to a run-down school estate – will be fixed without investment.**
- **There are also questions for the new government on where best to focus efforts to tackle disadvantage.** Should they increase funding and accountability incentives within schools to focus on these students? Or is it impossible to get improvements through efforts in school alone? Should there be a greater focus on wider support for young people outside of school?
- **Other challenges facing schools, including a lack of resources to support SEND students, increasing mental health issues and behaviour problems, also pose ongoing issues for government.** To tackle these, is the best approach using schools as a central hub to integrate other support services? Or should other agencies outside of schools designed to deal with these issues be better resourced?



# Introduction

Education is often considered a particularly polarised area of policy – with much unnecessary chopping and changing as governments and ministers come and go, wanting to make their mark. Yet, while there has been a lot of surface area turbulence the broad trends in policy have been remarkably stable for 35 years.

The English school system has moved from one that was run locally, with little central engagement, to one in which council's role has been largely hollowed out. Whitehall has taken control of standards, imposing a national curriculum, national testing, Ofsted inspections, league tables, floor targets and so forth. Ministers have also become more directive about identifying groups of students schools should be focusing on.

School leaders have become responsible for the day-to-day running of their school – with control over staffing and budgets that's rare in other countries. In more recent years multi-academy trusts have built up increasingly large groups of schools, with varying degrees of internal centralisation and, in some cases, substantial power.

This has happened across Conservative and Labour governments and continues today. The biggest policy difference between the two parties has, perhaps, been their attitudes towards the integration of wider children's services with schools. The New Labour government, in its final years, pushed hard on this agenda but it was scrapped by the Coalition who decided schools should focus on academic results.

The other big difference has been funding, which increased dramatically during the early 2000s, but has fallen back since 2010. The combination of a growing disconnect between schools and other (increasingly overburdened) services supporting children plus falling funding, has created many of the biggest challenges we see in schools today.

We have also seen a diminution of focus on young people from lower income families, a group highlighted in both rhetoric and policy under New Labour and the Coalition. Funding has become less targeted at these students, as have accountability measures.

**“The biggest policy difference between the two parties has, perhaps, been their attitudes towards the integration of wider children's services with schools.”**

In this paper we start with a brief history of policy reforms going back to the 1980s to set out this surprisingly consistent journey over the past few decades, as well as the bumps.

Then we investigate how much difference these changes have made. What does the best available evidence say about academic performance? Are pupils more likely to progress to further and higher education? How have different demographic groups fared, like those from low-income families that many reforms have, in theory, been focused on? We also look at changes in other areas of children's lives, how these interact with their experiences at school, and how that's changed the role of schools and colleges.

We conclude with some of the big questions the new government will need to consider as it develops its own plans for education at a time when spending is tight, and the munificence of the New Labour years will not be repeatable. Given this, what should they prioritise and how can they make sure they're learning from the history of recent reform efforts?

# A brief history of reform

In order to understand the last 20 years of education policy and its impact on students, we need to start a bit further back, in the 1980s, when the old model of English education - in which local government was the dominant player - ran out of steam. The changes enacted by the Thatcher government laid the foundations for the reforms enacted by successive governments since.

## Historical background (The 1980s to 1997)

The 1988 Education Reform Act was the pivotal moment in modern education policy. Prior to that central government had been largely uninvolved in the delivery of education, and headteachers had limited, albeit variable, autonomy over day-to-day decisions about staffing and budgets.

Schools were largely run by local authorities and there was significant variation in local curricula, and approaches to pedagogy. There was a schools inspectorate, and had been since 1839, but its role was to make recommendations to schools and local authorities, not hold them directly accountable via published reports.

From the late 1960s onwards this system had come under increasing pressure due to concern, not limited to the political right, that faddish “progressive” approaches to education, taken to extreme in a number of very left-wing London boroughs, were damaging children’s education.

The so-called “Black Papers” published by the conservative publication *Critical Quarterly*, containing essays on the evils of progressive education by luminaries like Kinsley Amis and Iris Murdoch, drew attention to the issue. As did a number of high profile cases such as that of William Tyndale Junior school in Islington in 1974, where parents protested following the introduction of extreme pedagogical approaches that involved a much more tolerant approach to poor behaviour and less direct instruction by teachers.

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In turn this led to central government taking a greater interest. Initially this was largely rhetorical. James Callaghan's 1976 speech at Ruskin College is generally seen as the turning point when a (Labour) Prime Minister acknowledged both that progressive methods could go too far and that government may need to get more involved.<sup>1</sup>

But it wasn't until Margaret Thatcher's second and third terms that things really started to change. The first steps were relatively tentative, such as the decision to publish inspection reports in 1983 and passing legislation to require more parent governors. 1988 Act though, was revolutionary, and pushed through with great enthusiasm by education secretary Ken Baker.<sup>2</sup> It began a 35 year process of bifurcation whereby powers held at local authority level were pushed upwards to the centre and downwards to schools, gutting the middle.

The powers that went upwards related to the setting and monitoring of standards, as a direct response to concerns that these were being undermined by changing pedagogical fashions. A national curriculum was created, giving central government control over content, and new national tests for 7, 11 and 14-year-olds were introduced to check on whether this content was being taught. These new forms of control were supplemented four years later with another Act that created Ofsted, an inspectorate that was explicitly designed to hold schools publicly accountable to government and parents, rather than simply provide recommendations for improvement.<sup>3</sup>

An additional form of bottom-up accountability was introduced in the form of school choice, or rather preference as parents have never been guaranteed to get their first choices. This was done both by requiring parents to be given options in the admissions process, but also ensuring that the funding formula for schools were set on a per pupil basis rather than block grants, so they had an incentive to attract students. In areas

<sup>1</sup> Callaghan, J. (1976, October 18). *A rational debate based on the facts*. <https://www.education-uk.org/documents/speeches/1976ruskin.html>

<sup>2</sup> Education Reform Act c.40. (1988). *Education Reform Act c.40* [Text]. Statute Law Database. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/contents>

<sup>3</sup> Education (Schools) Act c.38. (1992). *Education (Schools) Act c.38* [Text]. Statute Law Database. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/38/contents>

with excess places this created competitive pressure while also reducing incentives for schools to work together.

At the same time as these new forms of accountability were being introduced, power over the day-to-day running of schools was devolved downwards to headteachers via a reform called “Local Management of Schools”.<sup>4</sup> This required authorities to hand over control of budgets to school leaders, which not only removed a key control lever authorities had to insist on particular ways of doing things, but also gave heads more freedom over staffing. It also gave a massive boost to the status of school leaders and, over time, led to a new brand of high profile “superheads”.

The 1988 Act also allowed schools to free themselves entirely of local authority oversight by going “grant maintained”, though as parents had to agree to it in a ballot a lot of the schools that opted-out, at least initially, were those that were historically less attached to their authority, in wealthier areas. Alongside the growing group of grant maintained schools, there were around 1,100 by 1996,<sup>5</sup> Baker also set up fifteen City Technology Colleges, sponsored by a business or individual.<sup>6</sup> These also operated outside of local authority control, and would go on to inspire the next wave of reform under Labour.

**“These changes transformed the incentives for those running schools, with new accountability mechanisms driving different behaviours.”**

These changes transformed the incentives for those running schools, with new accountability mechanisms driving different behaviours. They also transformed the national debate about education. New data from national tests and GCSEs – which were also first examined in 1988 – plus more focused and graded Ofsted reports led to widespread concerns about standards, particularly for students from lower income families. There was also a rise in coverage around behavioural problems, particularly those related to gangs, an issue starkly highlighted by the murder of headteacher Phillip Lawrence, in 1995, outside his school in North-West London.

<sup>4</sup> Dixon, R. (1991). Local management of schools. *Public Money & Management*, 11(3), 47–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540969109387668>

<sup>5</sup> Committee on Standards in Public Life. (1996). *Chapter 3: Grant-maintained schools*. (2nd Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life.). [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a74d79f40f0b65f61322ac7/2ndInquiry\\_FullReport\\_Chapter3.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a74d79f40f0b65f61322ac7/2ndInquiry_FullReport_Chapter3.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Gewirtz, S., Whitty, G., & Edwards, T. (1992). City Technology Colleges: Schooling for the Thatcher Generation? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 40(3), 207–217. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3120890>

Initially this was often tied into concerns, particularly on the right, that the closure of most selective grammar schools in the 1960s and 70s had undermined standards. There were endless articles and columns worrying about “sink schools” in inner-cities and persistent failure in the lowest income areas. (Before the 2001 election Alastair Campbell coined the phrase “bog standard comprehensive” to describe what New Labour were trying to move away from and almost immediately regretted it.)

The response from central government was to use its newly gained powers to become increasingly involved in directly improving school standards, both through sanctioning “failure” more aggressively and directing activity in the classroom beyond the national curriculum.

The last Conservative education secretary of the 1979-97 period, Gillian Shephard, was the first to use her powers to take direct control of a school – Hackney Downs in 1995. The commissioners she appointed concluded it was in such a bad way that it should be closed, which it was (nine years later a new school, Mossbourne Community Academy, opened on the site and quickly became a nationally recognised success story.)<sup>7</sup>

## New Labour: 1997 - 2010

Labour continued this approach, with the combative David Blunkett taking over from Shephard in 1997. He was advised by Michael Barber, who had been one of the Hackney Downs commissioners, and had little time for what he saw as a defeatist acceptance of poor performance for disadvantaged students. Blunkett quickly published a list of another eighteen “failing” schools into which team of expert headteachers were sent to support turnaround.<sup>8</sup> And the following year established a more formal failure regime, with central intervention in schools that were unable to improve having been given a “special measures” rating by Ofsted.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Judd, J. (1995, November 1). *Failed school to be shut down*.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/failed-school-to-be-shut-down-1536698.html>

<sup>8</sup> BBC. (1997). *Government names failing schools*. BBC Politics 97.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/politics97/news/05/0520/blunkett.shtml>

<sup>9</sup> Local Government Chronical. (1998, June 2). *Blunkett outlines tough new measures on failing schools*. *Local Government Chronicle (LGC)*. <https://www.lgcplus.com/archive/blunkett-outlines-tough-new-measures-on-failing-schools-02-06-1998/>

In 2000 this was supplemented by a “floor standard” for all schools – with sanctions for any where fewer than 25% of pupils got five good GCSEs. At this point 530 schools (around a sixth of all secondary schools) were failing to meet this low bar, which is indicative of why there was such widespread concern about standards at the time.<sup>10</sup> In the same year the city academies programme was launched, which was essentially a rebranded version of the City Technology Colleges set up by Baker. Except this time it was usually used, not to build completely new schools, but “turnaround” inner-city comprehensives that local authorities had failed to improve.<sup>11</sup> These flagship academies had money lavished on new buildings designed by high profile architects, and were sponsored by an individual or business.

Alongside this much more aggressive approach to accountability, Blunkett also sought to direct activity within all schools from the centre, introducing the tightly sequenced Literacy and Numeracy Hours for primary schools. Over the course of Labour’s time in government these morphed into broader “National Strategies” for primary and secondary subjects, and included detailed approaches to assessment.<sup>12</sup> None of these were ever formally mandated but many schools felt they would have a better chance of success with Ofsted and in national Key Stage tests if they complied. Indeed one of the lessons from this period is that – under pressure of the broader accountability regime – schools will typically be compliant well beyond formal mandation.

All of this newfound centrally directed pressure on schools led to positive and negative incentives. On the positive side there was much greater focus on standards for lower performing students, particularly those in communities that had too often been written off in the past. This group had not historically been prioritised by the school system because they did not go on to post-16 academic study, and many had gone straight into work at 16.

<sup>10</sup> Eason, G. (2008, June 9). *Raising the bar on school results*.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7444148.stm>

<sup>11</sup> BBC. (2000, September 15). *‘City academies’ to tackle school failure*. BBC Education.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/925378.stm>

<sup>12</sup> Eason, G. (2009, June 26). *What are the national strategies?*

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/8120855.stm>

But with the long-term decline of manufacturing industries, and increasing reluctance of businesses to hire younger workers, this group were increasingly becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training). Greater pressure on schools to get good GCSEs for this group dramatically increased the numbers going into post-16 education. This was accompanied by an expansion in the further education sector. In 1992 FE colleges had been taken out of local authority control and, in effect, been turned into businesses.<sup>13</sup> As a result there was a wave of mergers and expansion, alongside an increasing array of non-academic qualifications like BTECs (initially awarded from 1984 but taken over by the Edexcel exam board in 1996).

Relatedly there was also more attention paid by schools to behaviour and low-level disruption, given both the damage it was doing to schools' ability to achieve accountability benchmarks and its importance within an Ofsted framework that now had serious consequences for school leadership teams.

The negative effect of tougher accountability, though, was that schools, inevitably, started gaming the metrics being used to judge them. This rarely involved outright cheating but instead using the letter, rather than the spirit, of rules to maximise outcomes for pupils and the school. Something that could always be justified on the basis it would be harmful to students life chances if other schools were exploiting loopholes that you were not.

This gaming took many forms including heavily focusing on students on the borderline between a D and C grade (the marker of a "good" GCSE) at the expense of those doing better or worse; diverting students on to GCSE "equivalent" courses that counted the same for accountability measures but were seen as easier to achieve; and providing subtle forms of support to pupils doing coursework or, later, controlled assessments in a

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<sup>13</sup> Further and Higher Education Act, c.13. (1992). *Further and Higher Education Act, c.13* [Text]. Statute Law Database. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/13/contents>



classroom environment, but without the stricter conditions associated with traditional exams.<sup>14</sup>

All of this created additional workload for teachers; meant that young people were often shunted on to inappropriate courses that racked up points; and also made it impossible to assess whether standards were really changing over time. Each part of the assessment system at the time was criterion referenced rather than norm referenced. This meant that it was possible for grades to keep inflating as schools got better at helping young people meet criteria regardless of whether that was genuinely reflective of real improvement (in norm referenced systems the percentage of pupils who can get each grade is specified in advance and doesn't change from year to year.)

While continuing to push top-down intervention and accountability, Labour also pursued the other half of Ken Baker's bifurcation of powers by increasing individual school leadership autonomy over the day-to-day management of schools. This plank of their programme was heavily driven by Andrew Adonis, who had persuaded Tony Blair to introduce the academies programme as a No. 10 adviser, and then became a junior education minister in 2005.

The 2006 Education and Inspection Act was Adonis's attempt to free schools from what he saw as ineffective local authority control via the creation of the Trust model.<sup>15</sup> This was fairly similar to grant maintained status (that had been scrapped by Blair when he arrived in Downing Street to his later regret), giving schools greater control over their assets, staffing and admissions. It was wildly unpopular within the Labour party, where there was still significant support for local authorities, and only passed with Conservative support.

In the final years of the Labour government this familiar two-track approach continued. Targets were toughened up, with the floor standard for schools changed to require good English and Maths GCSEs; national

<sup>14</sup> Richmond, T., & Freedman, S. (2009). *Rising Marks, Falling Standards*. Policy Exchange. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/rising-marks-falling-standards-apr-09-2.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Education and Inspections Act, c.40. (2006). *Education and Inspections Act, c.40* [Text]. Statute Law Database. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/40/contents>

strategies continued to be rolled out; academies continued to be opened, though Trust status never really took off.

But from 2007 the new education secretary, Ed Balls, introduced a new focus – a third track - the integration of education into the wider children’s service space. This built on an existing programme called Every Child Matters, introduced in 2003 following the tragic death of eight-year-old Victoria Climbié, and an inquiry which highlighted multiple failures of child protection services.<sup>16</sup> In 2008 Balls passed legislation requiring schools, and other public services, to participate in Children’s Trusts that were supposed to develop integrated plans for children and young people in their area.<sup>17</sup> The idea was not just to improve child protection, but broader health and wellbeing.

A “Children’s Plan” published by the DfE also tried to integrate other Labour initiatives, like Sure Start, into more of a coherent whole.<sup>18</sup> Had Labour won the 2010 election it is likely they would have continued to push this “third track”, but as it was it never had enough time to bed in, and it’s unclear what the benefits and costs would have been.

## **The Coalition and Conservatives: 2010 - 2024**

The arrival of the Coalition government in 2010 presaged a return to a simpler two-track policy agenda based, again, on the same bifurcation between centralised standards and school leader autonomy that had driven policy since 1988. The attempts at integration via Children’s Trusts were quickly scrapped and schools reoriented to focusing on academic attainment.

Top-down accountability was, again, strengthened in multiple ways. Schools that received the lowest grade in an Ofsted inspection saw their leadership replaced, and a new academy sponsor introduced, in a process that came close to automatic (and indeed did become legally required in

<sup>16</sup> Chief Secretary to the Treasury. (2003). *Every Child Matters*.

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c95a4e5274a0bb7cb806d/5860.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Children and Young Persons Act, c.23. (2008). *Children and Young Persons Act, c.23* [Text]. Statute Law Database. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/23>

<sup>18</sup> Department for Children, Schools and Families. (2007). *The Children’s Plan: Building brighter futures*. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d831740f0b64a5813f756/2007-childrens-plan.pdf>

the 2016 Education and Adoption Act<sup>19</sup>). The most popular mechanisms for gaming assessments were countered with a series of reforms to exams: traditional end of course tests were made a much larger component of grades; numerous non-GCSE and A-level qualifications were downgraded so as to no longer be considered “equivalent” for accountability purposes; and new measures, like “Progress 8” were introduced to ensure schools focused on all students rather than just those on a particular borderline.<sup>20</sup>

A new curriculum was introduced which, particularly for core subjects at primary, increased the amount of content children were expected to know.

Perhaps most significantly, in a move that is still not widely understood, even within the education sector, the mechanism for setting exam grades was changed to something that isn’t norm referencing but resembles it. Since 2011 the exam regulator Ofqual has tightly prescribed grade boundaries through a process called “comparable outcomes”.<sup>21</sup> This was an innovative (and globally unique) response to the new government’s determination to stop grade inflation. This seeks to ensure there is no increase between years unless there is clear evidence of a genuine improvement in standards. A national reference test was later introduced to provide evidence of any real changes in standards, at least in English and maths, using a sample-test that is not high stakes for students.<sup>22</sup>

The consequence of all these changes to the assessment system is that since 2011 we have not seen significant improvements in grades, of the kind that happened annually under the previous system. The only exception was during the period when exams couldn’t be taken due to the pandemic, and school assessed grades were significantly more generous. But the system has subsequently reverted back to 2011-2019 levels.

<sup>19</sup> Education and Adoption Act, c.6. (2016). *Education and Adoption Act, c.6* [Text]. Statute Law Database. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/6/contents>

<sup>20</sup> Department for Education (2022) How to understand school performance – everything you need to know. <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2022/10/19/how-to-understand-school-performance-everything-you-need-to-know/>

<sup>21</sup> Balaban, C., Lloyd, J., & SurrIDGE, P. (2021, November 18). *Comparable Outcomes: Setting the standard?* <https://www.aqi.org.uk/briefings/comparable-outcomes-setting-the-standard/>

<sup>22</sup> Ofqual. (2024a). *The National Reference Test in 2024*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-national-reference-test-in-2024>

Any individual school can still see its performance go up or down but it's now zero sum, to do so, in practice, another school must do worse. While entirely logical, doing this while ratcheting up the consequences of accountability yet further removed the (unintended) safety valve that had previously existed under Labour. The resultant build-up of pressure on school leaders and teachers has likely been a contributing factor to workforce challenges and lower morale across the system.

A safety valve of another kind was closed off too. Under Labour higher levels of accountability had been accompanied, particularly from 1999-2005, with large above inflation increases in spending of a type the public sector had not experienced before.<sup>23</sup> This made greater expectations easier to sell and manage. Much of the money was spent on rapid increases in non-teaching staff, both administrative and teaching assistants, which, in theory at least, helped to contain workload. There was also, especially towards the end of Labour's years in government, a big increase in spending on the school estate, with a full overhaul promised via the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme.

Such large increases were not permanently sustainable but under the Coalition and then Conservative governments there was a screeching reverse, with per pupil funding falling, and BSF cancelled. By 2024 per pupil funding was still lower, in real terms, than it had been in 2010, an unprecedentedly long time without funding increases (see first chart below). Falls in capital spending (see second chart below) have created a large backlog in maintenance spending with an increasingly large percentage of buildings having to be used beyond their intended lifespan. Again, all of this has made further tightening in the accountability regime harder for school leaders to manage.

<sup>23</sup> IFS. (2023b, December 11). *Schools*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/education-spending/schools>

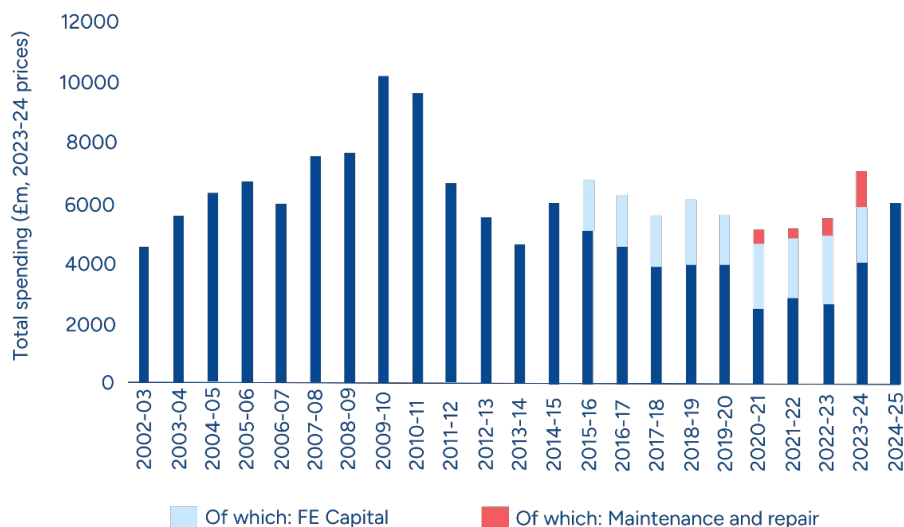
**Figure 1: Total school spending per pupil, relative to real terms levels in 2009-2010.** <sup>24</sup>

Relative to real-terms levels in 2009-10



Source: The Institute for Fiscal Studies

**Figure 2: Education capital spending in England over time, 2023-24 prices.<sup>25</sup>**



Source: The Institute for Fiscal Studies

The combination of more accountability pressure and less funding, which means teacher pay has fallen relative to other graduate professions, has put huge pressure on teacher recruitment. This is both because retention of existing teachers has fallen and recruitment of new teachers has become harder. Teacher salaries saw a real term pay cut from 2007 to 2021, with much of this fall due to pay freezes and caps implemented between 2014 and 2019. More recently, starting and early teacher salaries have seen some improvement, but overall have still seen a fall of 4-5% in real terms since 2007. More experienced teachers have seen an even greater reduction, with a fall of 8%.<sup>26</sup> Pay rises in 2022 and 2023 have also been below inflation, although the most recent pay rise announced in 2024 was above recent lower levels of inflation.<sup>27</sup> According to NFER data (see

**“Teacher pay has fallen relative to other graduate professions, which has put huge pressure on teacher recruitment.”**

<sup>24</sup> IFS. (2024c, June 4). *School spending in England: A guide to the debate during the 2024 general election*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/school-spending-england-guide-debate-during-2024-general-election>

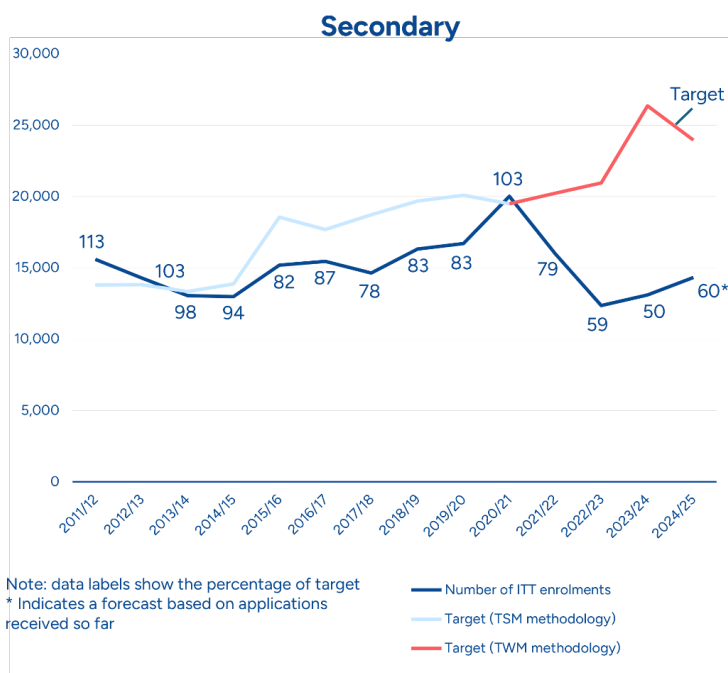
<sup>25</sup> IFS. (2024a). *The decline in spending on school buildings*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/decline-spending-school-buildings>

<sup>26</sup> FS. (2024b). *The long, long squeeze on teacher pay*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/long-long-squeeze-teacher-pay>

<sup>27</sup> Norden, J. (2024, July 30). *Teacher pay rise 2024-25: All you need to know*. <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/teacher-pay-rise-2024-25>

chart below) we have been unable to recruit more than 60% of the target number of secondary teachers in the past three years. For long-time shortage subjects like physics, computing and modern language the situation is even worse.

**Figure 3: Postgraduate ITT recruitment and target numbers in England.**<sup>28</sup>



Source: National Foundation for Educational Research

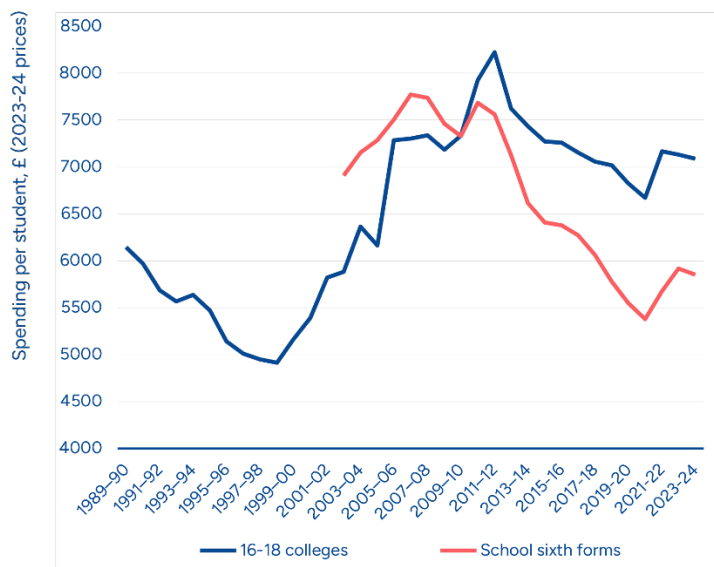
The biggest budget cuts fell on post-16 education – with colleges down 10% between 2010 and 2024, and sixth forms down 23% (see chart below).<sup>29</sup> This seriously limited the offer that FE colleges and sixth forms could make to students even as the numbers in full time education post-16 continued to increase. Alongside changes to the structure of A-levels this led to a big reduction in the number of courses being taken - the average

<sup>28</sup> Graph and analysis from NFER based on Department for Education. (2024, September 23). *Initial teacher training application statistics for courses starting in the 2024 to 2025 academic year.* <https://www.apply-for-teacher-training.service.gov.uk/publications/monthly-statistics>.

<sup>29</sup> IFS. (2023a, December 11). *Further education and sixth forms.* Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/education-spending/further-education-and-sixth-forms>

number of qualifications taken fell by 43% between 2016 and 2019 – and significantly less teaching time.<sup>30</sup>

**Figure 4: Spending per student in 16-18 colleges and sixth forms.**<sup>31</sup>



Source: The Institute for Fiscal Studies

As per the pattern since 1988, tougher accountability was accompanied by pledges of greater autonomy for school leaders over day-to-day delivery. Adonis’s 2006 Trust school reforms, which were themselves a version of Baker’s grant maintained schools, were once more revived in new form, this time as the “converter academy” programme. Schools rated “good” or “outstanding” by Ofsted were allowed to leave their local authority and become academies with the same freedoms given to the “sponsored” academies established by Labour.

At the third time of asking the reform, accompanied by an initial sizeable financial benefit to schools that left their local authority, took off and by

<sup>30</sup> Freedman, S. (2022, August 22). *The exam question: Changing the model of assessment reform*. Institute for Government. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/exam-question>

<sup>31</sup> IFS. (2023a, December 11). *Further education and sixth forms*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/education-spending/further-education-and-sixth-forms>



the end of the decade more than three quarters of secondaries, and 40% of primaries, would be academies, with the rest remaining under local authority oversight.<sup>32</sup> The main affect was not to increase autonomy, which was already high (though it did allow leaders to make some changes to their curriculum offer), but to allow for the rise of multi-academy trusts (MATs).

Over time more and more schools joined MATs which offered additional support and funding security in return for ceding some control. They became major players in the school system almost by stealth, and their purpose has never been clearly legally defined, or elucidated by government. Some run schools in a centralised way that allows practices to be scaled across a group, at the expense of individual school leader autonomy. Others provide back office support and little else. With a wide spectrum in between. There is little research to date on the effectiveness of different approaches. While some MATs seem to be able to get consistency of performance between their schools, others have struggled.<sup>33</sup> Significantly this process is a one-way ratchet, once a school has joined a MAT is ceases to exist as an independent legal entity and cannot unilaterally remove itself.

In many parts of the country the switch of schools to academy status largely completed the shift away from local authorities begun under the Thatcher government. While authorities still have important responsibilities, including over special education needs and supporting young people excluded from mainstream schools, their role in pedagogy and school improvement is much diminished. Though some larger counties with many primary schools that are not academies have retained school improvement teams.

Authorities are still responsible for ensuring an adequate number of places but can neither force academies to add places or close schools if birth rates drop. In order to manage so many schools centrally the DfE introduced regional directorates in 2014, which have grown significantly

<sup>32</sup> Department for Education. (2024a, June 6). *Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Academic year 2023/24*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>

<sup>33</sup> Hutchings, M., & Francis, B. (2018). *Chain Effects 2018: The impact of academy chains on low-income pupils*. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Chain-Effects-2018.pdf>

since. But they too cannot compel academies to take additional pupils, or close unless the school is judged by Ofsted to be inadequate. The speed with which the academies reforms were introduced has left a number of these legal wrinkles to be resolved by a future government.

Most of the post-2010 reforms described above were complete by 2014. Since then education policy has drifted somewhat, not helped by the general upheavals in British politics after the EU referendum in 2016 (since then there have been ten different education secretaries). There have been two attempts to “finalise” the academy reforms, in 2016 and 2022, by fixing a date for all schools to convert, but both died in Parliament due to the arrivals of new Prime Ministers and a lack of Conservative backbench enthusiasm.

The pandemic highlighted some of the challenges with the current system. The DfE struggled to manage such a centralised system in a time of crisis. With local authorities having been cut out of the system the department tried to provide laptops, and food, for lower income families directly, via unwieldy procurement systems. Likewise they tried to contract out post-pandemic catch-up tuition to a single central provider, Randstad, who managed it very poorly.

Subsequently ministers restricted themselves to fiddling about with accountability measures again, but even the toughest critic of schools would struggle to argue more sanctions would make any positive difference. And indeed in the light of the challenges to schools caused by the pandemic a renewed focus on accountability measures led morale to drop further. The approach that has been consistently in place since 1988, albeit with variations under different governments, has largely run out of steam. At the same time there is little support for reversing anything substantive, or, as yet, for any alternative paradigm.

## **Labour: 2024-?**

The new Labour government have trailed a schools bill for their first parliamentary session which contains what might be described as tidying up measures. It is expected to include proposals to strengthen the relationship between local authorities and academies, and, perhaps most significantly to provide some accountability for MATs, which would require

a clearer elucidation of their role. They have also instigated some changes to the way Ofsted will report, though it's unclear how meaningful these will be in practice.

But nothing proposed so far substantially changes the fundamental framework, established in the years since 1988, that schools are now operating in. The English education system remains both highly centralised, when it comes to standards-setting and accountability, and highly autonomous when it comes to the day-to-day management of schools and colleges. Equally the curriculum and assessment review initiated under Professor Becky Francis has promised "evolution not revolution".<sup>34</sup> For now, after decades of fairly constant reform things, on the academic side at least, seem fairly stable.

Where there are more urgent problems is on the pastoral side. Fifteen years of tight budgets at school level alongside significant cuts in welfare and to other public services, plus the aftershocks of the pandemic, have combined to create something of a crisis for the most vulnerable young people. This has been exacerbated by long trends towards higher diagnosis of various special educational needs (SEND) and neurological conditions. Legislation introduced in 2014 to improve access to SEND support has not worked, and have arguably increased demand without the resources being made available to increase supply.<sup>35</sup> As of 2024 most local authorities have now built up unsustainable debts related to SEND provision. At the same time, massive increases in demand for mental health services have overloaded the Child and Adolescent Mental Service (part of the NHS) in most parts of the country. More educated parents and those with financial resources are better able to navigate a system that is trying to heavily ration demand which has led to deepening inequality in the distribution of support.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Department for Education. (2024d, July 19). *Government launches Curriculum and Assessment Review*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-curriculum-and-assessment-review>

<sup>35</sup> Children and Families Act, c.6. (2014). *Children and Families Act, c.6* [Text]. Statute Law Database. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/contents>

<sup>36</sup> LSE. (2023, November 13). *Children in affluent areas get more special needs support*. London School of Economics and Political Science. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/News/Latest-news-from-LSE/2023/k-November-2023/Children-in-affluent-areas.aspx>

The combined effects of all these negative trends are, as we will see in the next section, threatening academic progress that has been made over the past few decades.

## What has changed?

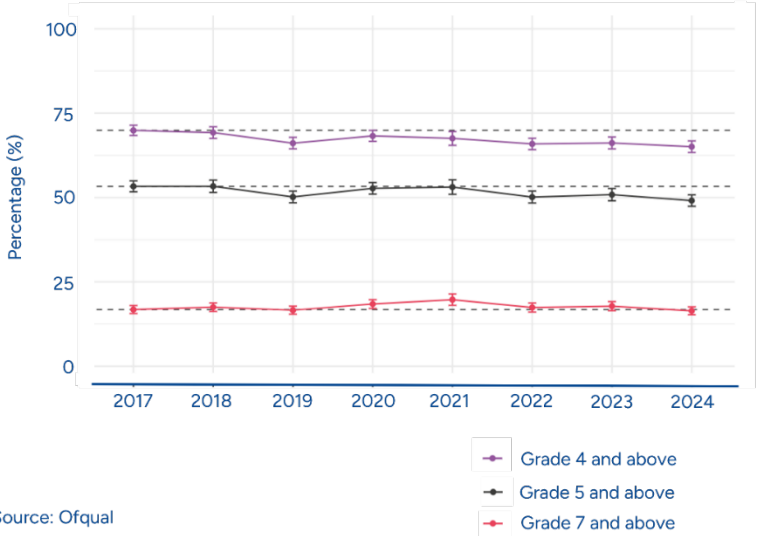
The big question is whether all of the reforms over 35 years, described in the previous section, have made any significant difference to the lives of young people. They've certainly changed the lives of teachers and leaders who are, according to workforce surveys, working longer hours and under more pressure than before (and since 2010 for less money). But has this resulted in better educated students living more fulfilled lives?

It is not a straightforward question to answer. From the introduction of GCSEs and national testing for younger age groups until 2011 there was a lot of grade inflation, as schools found ways to boost their statistics without, necessarily, improving the quality of education. Since 2011 grades have been artificially constrained by a system that resembles norm-referencing. All of which means that, while exam data can be used to assess changes between groups over time, it cannot tell us anything about changes in overall standards.

Since 2017 we have had a National Reference Test that does allow us to track standards for English and Maths for 16-year-olds. Here we can see that for English performance has dropped a little since Covid, except for higher attainers, meaning the gap between the top and the rest has widened somewhat. In Maths the pattern is similar but the drop has not been as significant, and performance has only fallen back to the same level as 2017.<sup>37</sup>

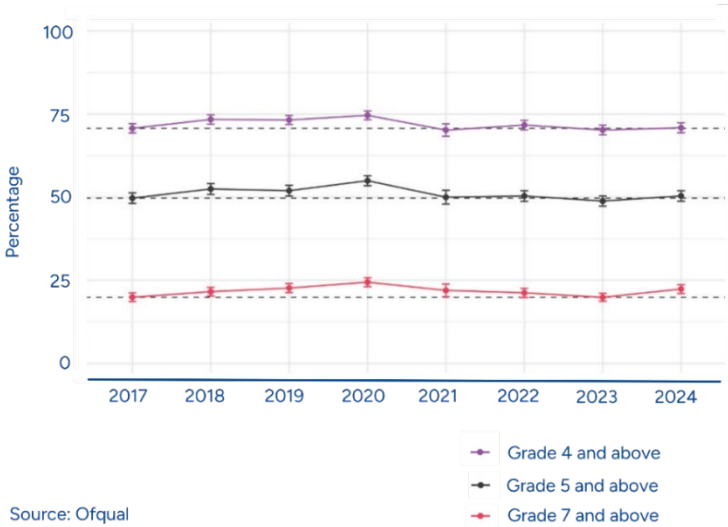
<sup>37</sup> Ofqual. (2024a). *The National Reference Test in 2024*. GOV.UK.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-national-reference-test-in-2024>

**Figure 5: Long term changes in National Reference Test (NRT) English over time from 2017 baseline.<sup>38</sup>**



Source: Ofqual

**Figure 6: Long term changes in National Reference Test (NRT) maths over time from 2017 baseline.<sup>39</sup>**



Source: Ofqual

Going back further requires getting more creative. There are two sets of international tests in which England has participated over multiple cycles: PISA run by the OECD and PIRLS/TIMSS run by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. In theory these tests should be stable over time and are low-stakes for the sample of students who take them. This should make them a good measure of performance over time, though particularly for PISA changes to the way the tests are delivered complicate these comparisons.

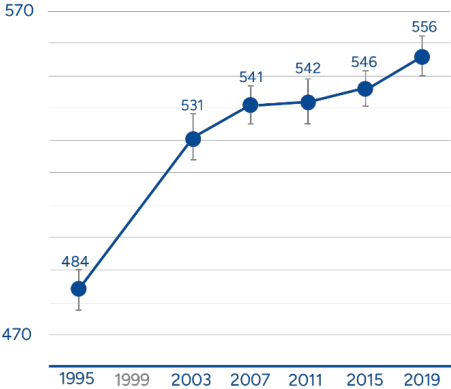
The TIMSS test looks at maths and science ability for 10-year-olds and 14-year-olds and the dataset starts in 1995. A scaled score of 500 represents average attainment when the test was first sat. As we can see England has improved significantly in maths at both age groups, but more so for 10-year-olds.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Ofqual. (2024b, August 22). *National Reference Test Results Digest 2024*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-national-reference-test-in-2024/national-reference-test-results-digest-2024>

<sup>39</sup> Ofqual. (2024b, August 22). *National Reference Test Results Digest 2024*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-national-reference-test-in-2024/national-reference-test-results-digest-2024>

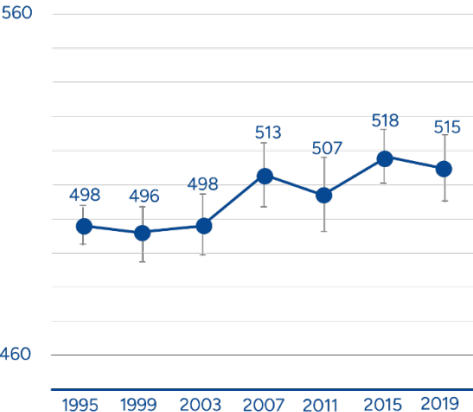
<sup>40</sup> IEA. (2019). *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019*. <https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/timss/2019>

**Figure 7: TIMSS maths performance for Grade 4 (10-year-olds) in England.<sup>41</sup>**



Source: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)

**Figure 8: TIMSS maths performance for Grade 8 (14-year-olds) in England<sup>42</sup>**



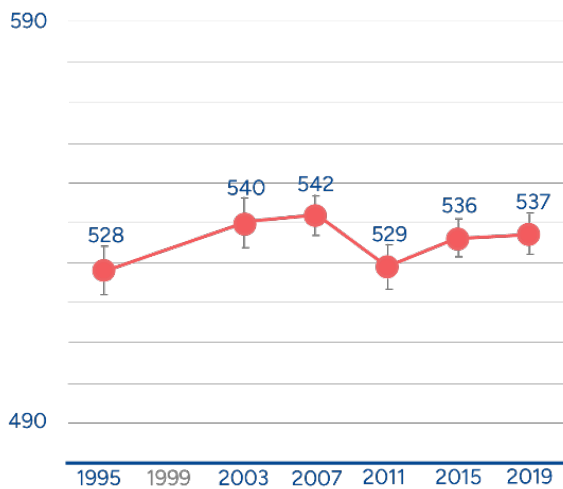
Source: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)

<sup>41</sup> IEA. (2019). *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019*. <https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/timss/2019>

<sup>42</sup> IEA. (2019). *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019*. <https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/timss/2019>

Over the same period performance in science stayed static for 10-year-olds and dropped somewhat for 14-year-olds, especially in recent years. It's impossible to attribute changes to any specific policy change with certainty but the drop in primary science performance after 2007 seems likely to be related to the decision to stop external assessment of science at KS2 in 2009. This may have had knock on effects to KS3 performance too, explaining the drop there. It certainly should increase caution about the effects of removing accountability related testing.

**Figure 9: TIMSS science performance for Grade 4 (10-year-olds) in England <sup>43</sup>**

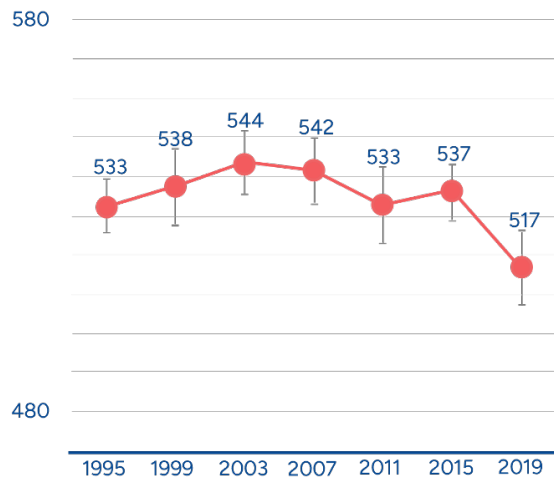


Source: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)

<sup>43</sup> IEA. (2019). *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019*. <https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/timss/2019>



**Figure 10: TIMSS science performance for Grade 8 (14-year-olds) in England <sup>44</sup>**



Source: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)

The PIRLS test for reading is run in different years (and only for the 10 year-old cohort). This means the last set of tests happened during Covid which may make results less comparable. But we can see that England has had broadly comparable scores each time it's been sat, with a slight dip in 2006.<sup>45</sup>

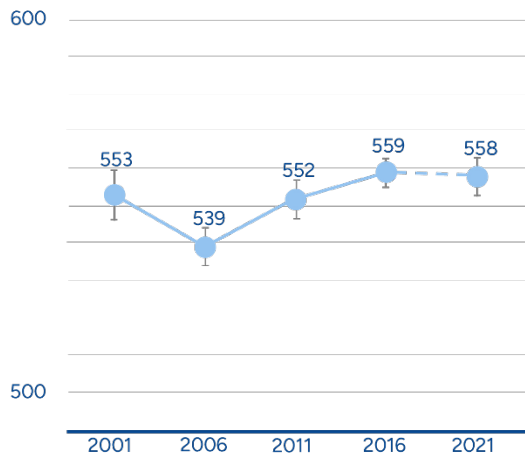
<sup>44</sup> IEA. (2019). *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019*.

<https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/timss/2019>

<sup>45</sup> EA. (2021). *Results – Trends in Reading Achievement – PIRLS 2021*.

<https://pirls2021.org/results/trends/overall/>

**Figure 11: PIRLS reading performance for grade 4 (10-year-olds) in England. <sup>46</sup>**



Source: Trends in Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)

In both TIMSS and PIRLS, England is one of the strongest performers. For reading England is the highest performing European country (if one excludes the Russian Federation who are widely thought to cheat the tests), and for maths – for the 10-year-old cohort – it is second only to Northern Ireland.

The other test, for 15-year-olds, is probably better known, largely because it's run by a bigger entity – the OECD – who are better at getting publicity. The comparable PISA dataset doesn't go so far back (there were earlier tests but they are not included in the most recent trend dataset as they are not considered comparable). Results for the UK (in which England is by far the biggest component) show an improvement in reading and maths in 2018 followed by a drop-off for the 2022 round taken during the pandemic. This drop off was lower than the average.<sup>47</sup> As with TIMSS science performance has declined, with the drop off starting with the first cohort not to do externally assessed KS2 tests.

<sup>46</sup> EA. (2021). *Results – Trends in Reading Achievement – PIRLS 2021*.

<https://pirls2021.org/results/trends/overall/>

<sup>47</sup> OECD. (2024). *PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment*. OECD.

<https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/pisa.html>

**Figure 12: PISA performance: United Kingdom – mathematics, reading and science.<sup>48</sup>**



Source: OECD, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

England’s position in the rankings has steadily improved over this period and, as with TIMSS and PIRLS, it is now one of the highest performing European countries. This is as much to do with a greater drop off in performance in other Western European countries as it is to do with improved performance here. Again we can’t make definitive causal inferences as to why but the detailed PISA data shows that immigrant students do considerably better in the UK than elsewhere in Western Europe (bar Ireland). The different nature of immigration (more work related and less humanitarian), and the fact that arrivals to the UK are more

<sup>48</sup> OECD. (2024). *PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment*. OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/pisa.html>

likely to speak English may be factors, as well as more effective approaches to integration.

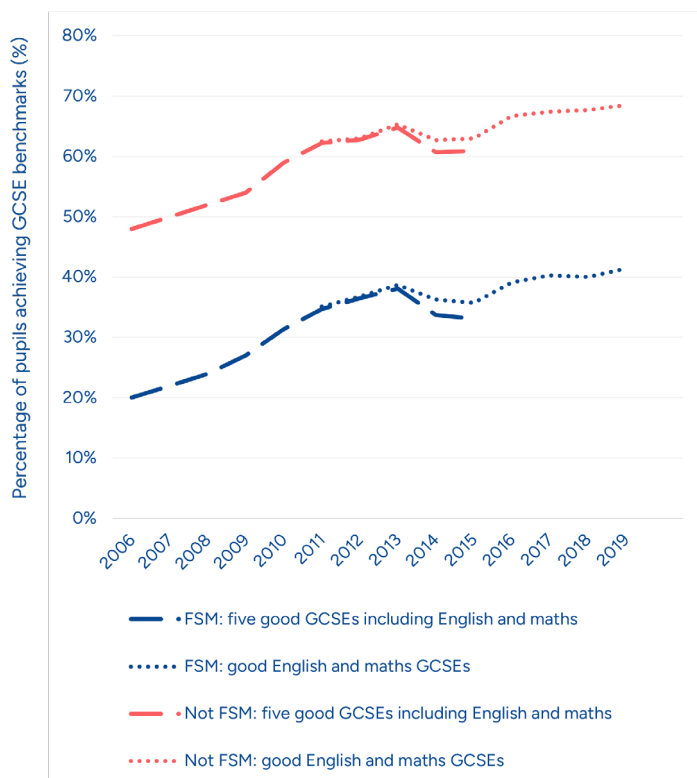
Taken collectively all this evidence suggests real improvements in maths and reading up to the pandemic from the start of the period in which reforms began, but a drop off in science, probably related to its exclusion from primary tests. There is also some evidence that schools in England weathered the pandemic better than elsewhere.

## **Changes between groups**

While high stakes tests, like those at the end of KS2 and GCSEs, can't tell us about overall standards over time, they can help us understand changes in the way different groups have performed compared to others.

For instance on a simple measure of GCSE performance since the mid-2000s we can see that the disadvantage gap between those on free school meals and those that aren't has been remarkably stable.

**Figure 13: GCSE performance by children’s eligibility for free school meals.<sup>49</sup>**



Note – Percentage of pupils earning five good GCSEs including English and maths available 2006 to 2015.

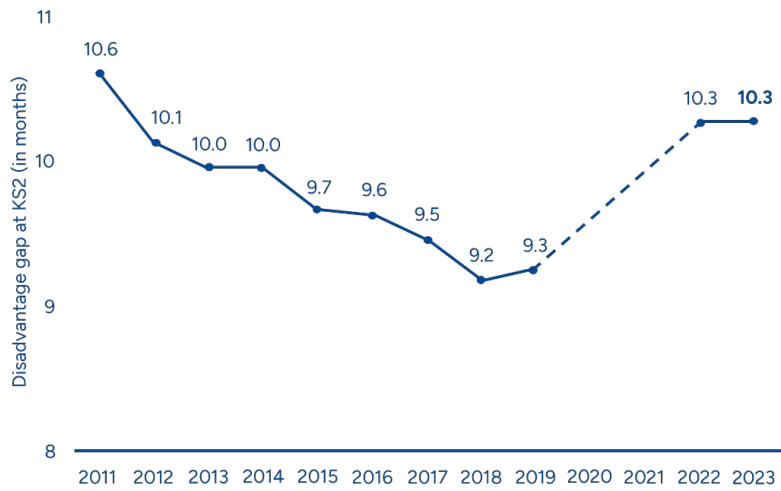
Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies

Despite all the rhetoric about closing the gap and the importance of education in overcoming poverty, little seems to have changed. On a more detailed measure used by the Education Policy Institute based on “Ever6” (pupils who have been on FSM at some point in the past six years), we can see that the gap in learning months was reducing in KS2 and GCSE tests somewhat but had already started rising again pre-covid. The pandemic then led to a loss of all the gains made since 2011.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Taken from Farquharson, C., McNally, S., & Tahir, I. (2022). *Education Inequalities*. <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Education-inequalities.pdf>

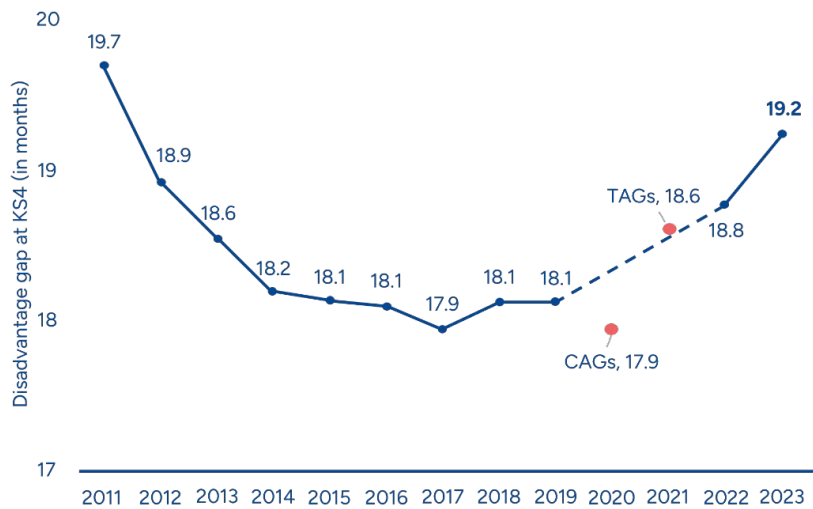
<sup>50</sup> EPI. (2024). *Annual Report 2024: Disadvantage*. Education Policy Institute. <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-disadvantage-2/>

**Figure 14: The disadvantage gap at the end of primary school.** <sup>51</sup>



Source: Education Policy Institute

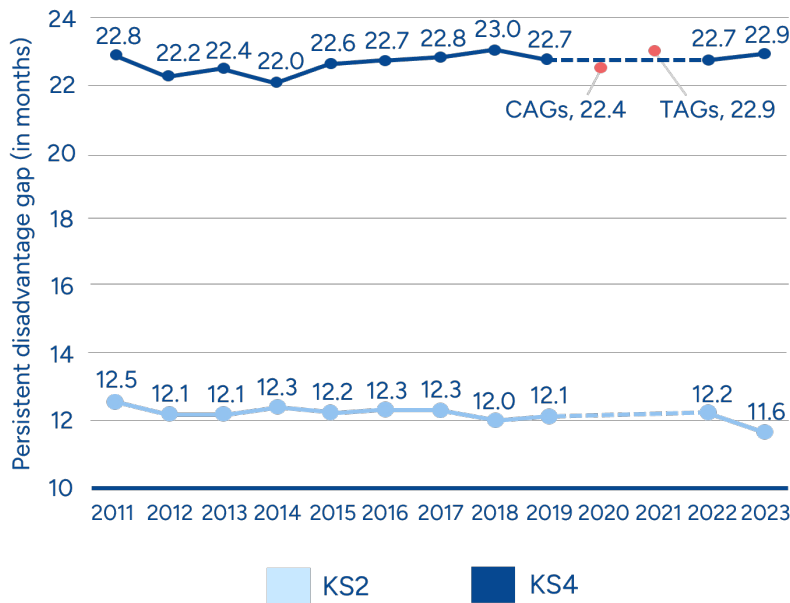
**Figure 15: The disadvantage gap in GCSE English and maths.** <sup>52</sup>



Source: Education Policy Institute

Under a different measure of persistent disadvantage – comparing those who have been on FSM for 80% or more of their time at school with everyone else – the gap has been largely unmoved throughout this period.

**Figure 16: The persistent disadvantage gap.<sup>53</sup>**



Source: Education Policy Institute

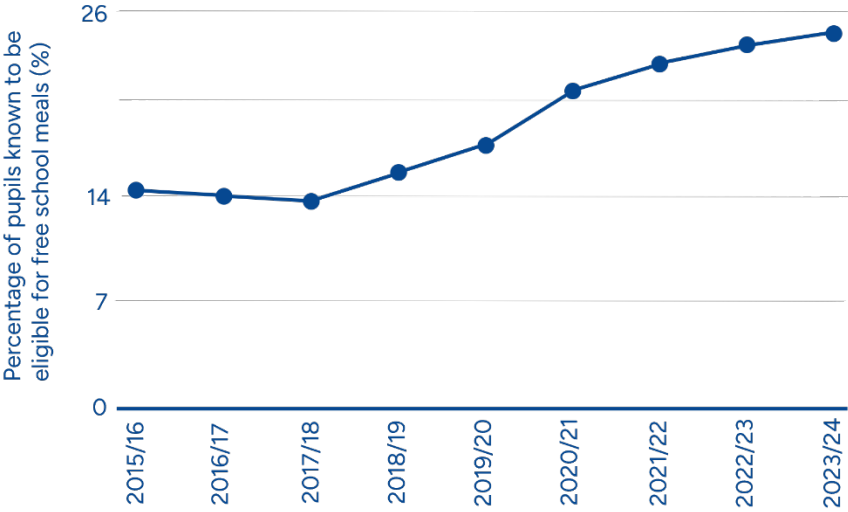
These various measures are all dependent on free school meals as a classifier of disadvantage which is not ideal for many reasons, not least that many students not eligible for FSM still have parents with well below average income. Moreover, due to the introduction of universal credit and transitional arrangements protecting students who otherwise would have lost eligibility to FSM, the overall number of children receiving them has increased (see chart below). Though some of this will also be due to an increase in the number of families in poverty in recent years.

<sup>51</sup> EPI. (2024). *Annual Report 2024: Disadvantage*. Education Policy Institute. <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-disadvantage-2/>

<sup>52</sup> EPI. (2024). *Annual Report 2024: Disadvantage*. Education Policy Institute. <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-disadvantage-2/>

<sup>53</sup> EPI. (2024). *Annual Report 2024: Disadvantage*. Education Policy Institute. <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-disadvantage-2/>

**Figure 17: Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over time.**<sup>54</sup>



Source: Department for Education

If we were able to look at income deciles we might see the gap widening more due, for instance, to the increase in private school spending compared with a fall in state school income. But this information is not available.

Either way these figures are frustrating given the focus on disadvantage throughout the New Labour and Coalition years, which saw funding skewed towards schools with more pupils from low-income backgrounds and significant efforts via Ofsted and other accountability metrics to focus attention on gap closing.

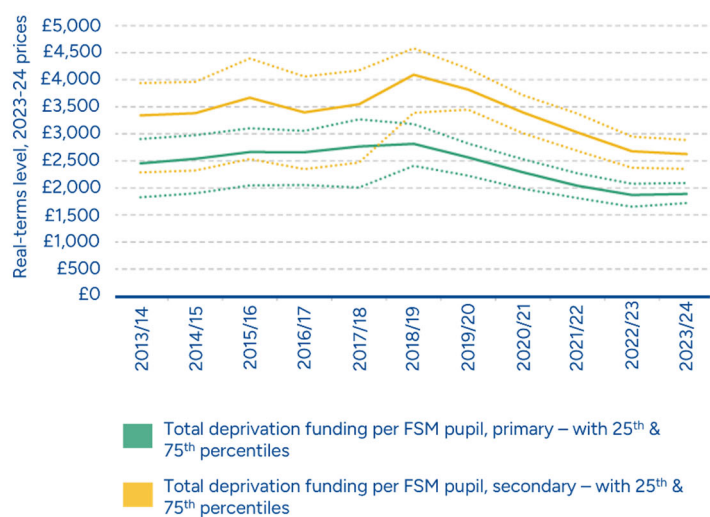
The EPI data, though, does suggest that at least for young people who were not the most persistently disadvantaged this pressure was starting to have some effect. But over time the focus on disadvantage has waned, with Justine Greening, who left office in 2018, the last to really focus on it,

<sup>54</sup> Department for Education. (2024a, June 6). *Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Academic year 2023/24*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>



and very little coming out of the “Levelling-up” agenda on regional inequalities. The DfE had largely stopped referring to the disadvantage gap prior to Labour’s arrival. After the 2019 election the funding formula was reset to boost funding for those who have more students from higher income families (see chart below for the impact on funding for FSM pupils). The pupil premium, introduced by the coalition, to further boost the finances of schools with more FSM pupils, has not been increased by inflation and the effects have been neutered by the broader changes to funding exacerbating the problem. One of the original aims was to create an incentive for schools to actively recruit pupils from lower income families, and the admissions code was changed to allow for that. But the amount of money isn’t enough to create that incentive and only a handful of schools have made use of this rule change.

**Figure 18: Levels of deprivation funding within local authority (LA) funding formulae over time (2023-24 prices).<sup>55</sup>**



Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies

<sup>55</sup> Drayton, E., Farquharson, C., Ogden, K., Sibieta, L., Tahir, I., & Waltmann, B. (2023). *Annual report on education spending in England: 2023*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-12/IFS-Annual-report-on-education-spending-in-England-2023-new.pdf>

Exam data also highlights other changes in performance between groups. The longstanding gender gap between girls and boys has been largely stable since the introduction of GCSEs, though has widened somewhat for post-16 academic and tertiary qualifications. 54% of female state school students now go on to higher education compared to 40% of male ones, and the gap is bigger for those on FSM.<sup>56</sup> There is still a gender pay gap in the opposite direction in the labour market, but this now seems almost entirely related to childcare as men and women in the 20s and 30s have similar earnings.<sup>57</sup>

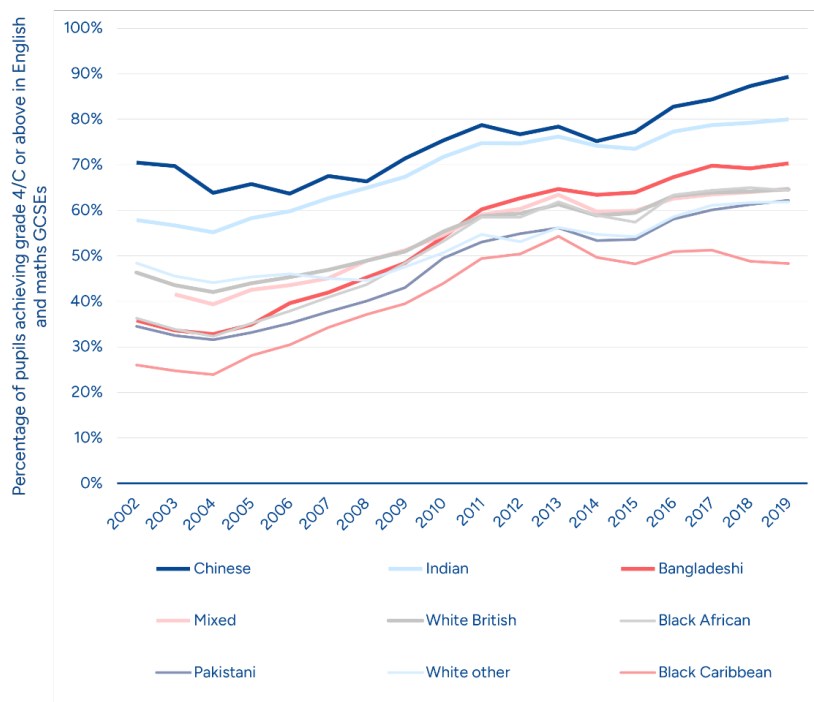
Where we've seen really significant shifts is in the performance of different ethnic groups. In particular pupils from Bangladeshi and Black African backgrounds have improved a much greater pace than others.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Lewis, J., & Bolton, P. (2024). *Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England*. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9195/>

<sup>57</sup> Francis-Devine, B., & Brione, P. (2024). *The gender pay gap*. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07068/>

<sup>58</sup> Farquharson, C., McNally, S., & Tahir, I. (2022). *Education Inequalities*. <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Education-inequalities.pdf>

**Figure 19: Share of pupils achieving good English and maths GCSEs, by ethnicity.**<sup>59</sup>



Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies

The picture is even more stark when we look at students on FSM. On the Attainment 8 GCSE measure pupils on FSM from Bangladeshi families score higher than the average for all white British pupils. All ethnic groups now outperform white British pupils when looking at FSM students only (except for gypsy, Roma, and Irish travellers).<sup>60</sup>

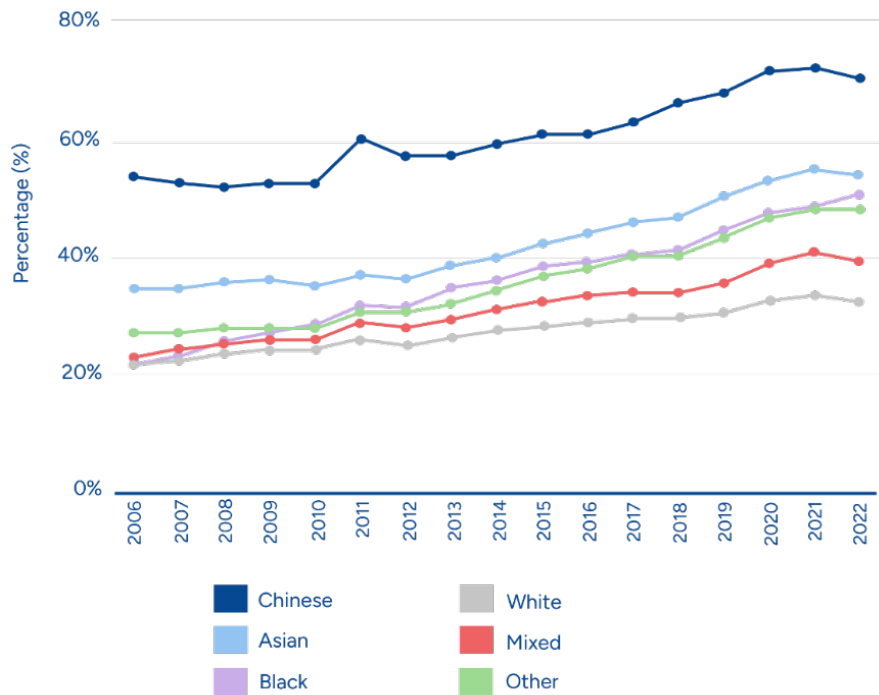
This is also reflected in HE entrance. 58% of Bangladeshi students on FSM (47% of Pakistani) go to university compared to just 16% of white British FSM students. Looking at all students, those from ethnic minority

<sup>59</sup> Drayton, E., Farquharson, C., Ogden, K., Sibieta, L., Tahir, I., & Waltmann, B. (2023). *Annual report on education spending in England: 2023*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-12/IFS-Annual-report-on-education-spending-in-England-2023-new.pdf>

<sup>60</sup> Department for Education. (2023d, October 17). *GCSE results (Attainment 8)*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/gcse-results-attainment-8-for-children-aged-14-to-16-key-stage-4/latest/>

backgrounds are now significantly more likely to go to university than white British students.<sup>61</sup>

**Figure 20: Percentage of state school pupils aged 18 who were accepted to higher education in the UK, by ethnicity over time.<sup>62</sup>**



Source: gov.uk

<sup>61</sup> HM Government. (2023, November 21). *Entry rates into higher education*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/higher-education/entry-rates-into-higher-education/latest/>

<sup>62</sup> HM Government. (2023, November 21). *Entry rates into higher education*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/higher-education/entry-rates-into-higher-education/latest/>

## Other measures of success

Attainment is, of course, only one measure of a school system, albeit an important one given the impact of qualifications on students' life chances. There are other ways to think about change over time.

One is that public discourse, particularly from the media, has changed dramatically over the period. In the 1990s and early 2000s there were regular headlines suggesting the comprehensive system had failed and that inner-city schools were unfixable.

These concerns were often hyperbolic but based in reality. As we've seen there were hundreds of schools where less a quarter of pupils got five good GCSEs. A combination of a greater focus on implementing consistent behaviour policies, real improvements in outcomes driven, in part, by greater accountability, and grade inflation, mean this is no longer the case. There are, of course, still underperforming schools but the overall bar of what is acceptable has been raised.

Critically, given where the national media are based, this has been most true of all in inner-London, supported by both very high levels of immigration (by ethnic groups that are the highest performing) and additional funding and policy focus, particularly during the New Labour years. Inner London schools now outperform the national average, which is extremely unusual for capital cities and means the commentariat are much happier with their choice of school. Which in turn means there is general acceptance that the comprehensive system is here to stay. When the Conservatives promised to reintroduce grammar schools in 1997 it was one of their more popular policies, despite their defeat, but when they went back to the idea in 2017 it polled worse, and had less press support. It did not feature in either their 2019 or 2024 manifestos.

Relatedly public concern about the state of education has also reduced. The pollster Ipsos has been asking the public for their top three issues since 1974. The only time education was number one was in 1997. It was still top three in 2004 but in 2024 has fallen well down the list.<sup>63</sup> This is

<sup>63</sup> IPSOS. (2022, December 1). *Important issues facing Britain | Ipsos*. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/important-issues-facing-britain>

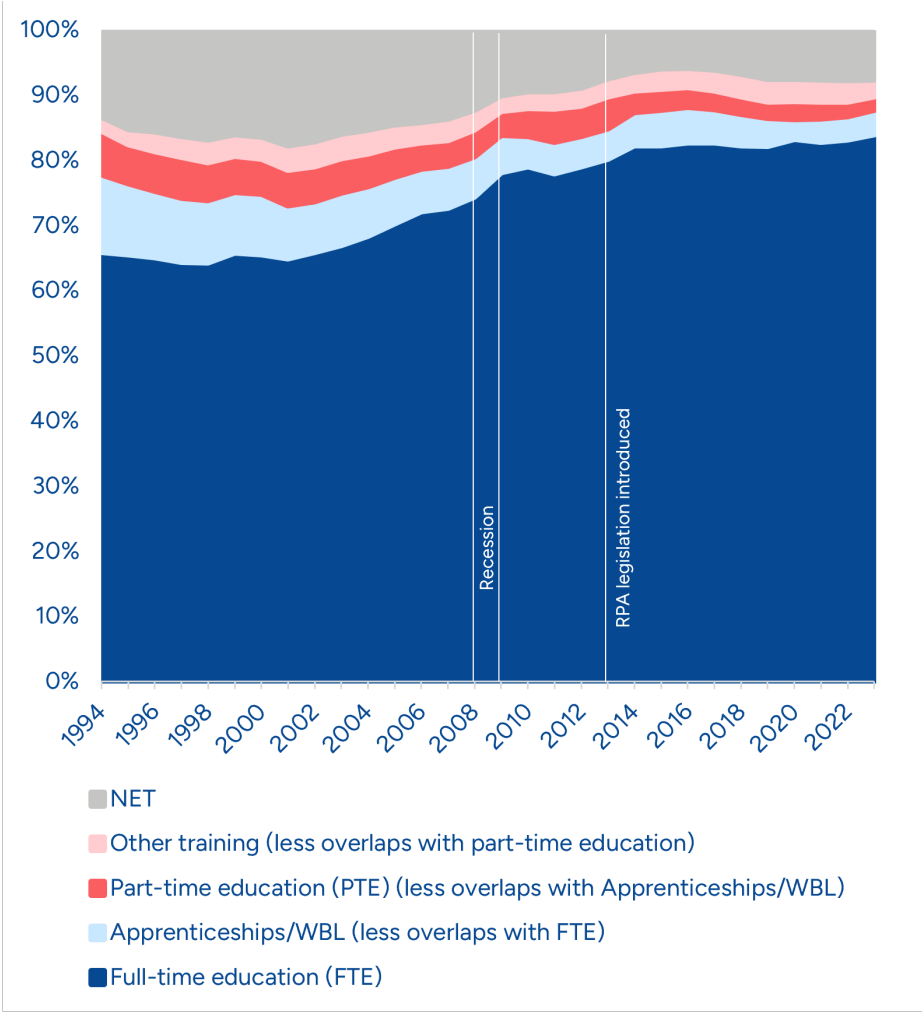
both a positive because it shows a significant drop-off in concern but also a challenge as it has made education less of a political priority for both parties, and less attention can mean less investment.

Another reason that concern is dropping is that more people are succeeding, at least in terms of accessing qualifications. This does not, given grade inflation, necessarily mean standards are improving, but it does mean more people are leaving the system with better hopes of labour market access. And it also means, given the greater awareness in both higher education and amongst employers of arguments about social mobility and fairness, that we are starting to see access to top career pathways opening up.

As the chart below shows the numbers in full time education post-16 have increased dramatically since the mid-90s as a result of changes both to expectations on schools and to the needs of the labour market. Note this shift happened almost entirely prior to formal legislation to make some form of post-16 education compulsory. As there are no sanctions or enforcement mechanisms this change, made towards the end of the New Labour government, was a largely symbolic recognition of a change that had already happened.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Department for Education. (2023a). *Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18, Calendar year 2023*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-and-training-and-employment>

**Figure 21: The proportion of 16/17-year-olds in education or apprenticeships.<sup>65</sup>**



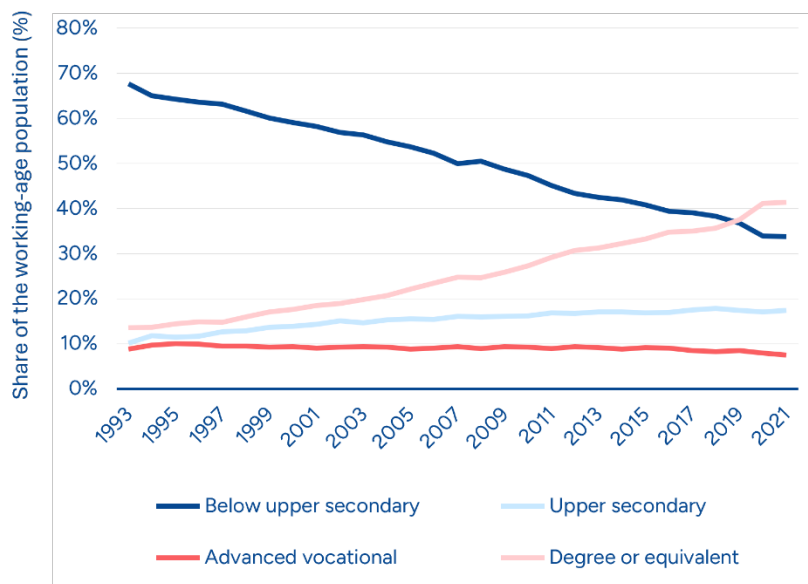
Source: Department for Education

The expansion in full-time education post-16 has translated into a much greater number of young people going into tertiary education. As the chart below from the IFS shows there has been a transformation in highest

<sup>65</sup> Department for Education. (2023a). *Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18, Calendar year 2023*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-and-training-and-employment>

qualification type held by working people over this period, and one that will continue as older people retire.<sup>66</sup>

**Figure 22: Highest level of qualification among the UK working-age population (aged 22-64).<sup>67</sup>**



Note: Among people with UK-based qualifications. Between 4% and 8% of the population had a different below-degree qualification as their highest.

Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies

This is a positive in that far more people now have access to university, and the benefits of the graduate premium that follows. But it has also created a more profound divide between those with degrees and not as more and more jobs now require a degree. There are fewer than ever well paying jobs for those with lower level qualifications and while the gap between the students from the lowest and highest income families going to university has shrunk a little it remains substantial. Alternative routes into more attractive jobs, like higher level apprenticeships remain extremely rare and

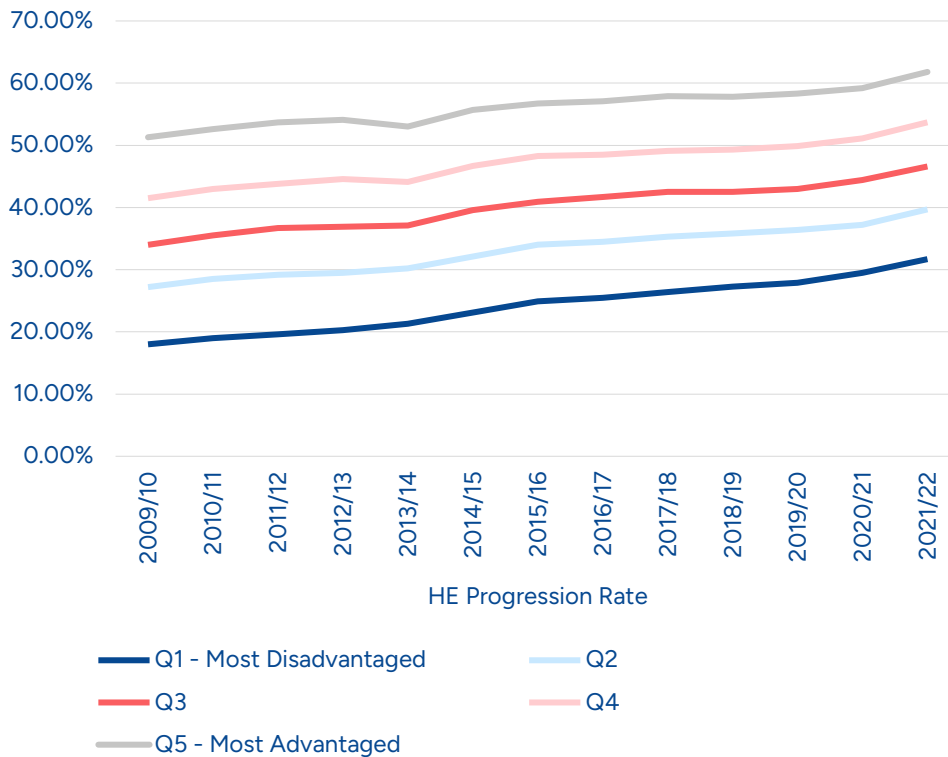
<sup>66</sup> Farquharson, C., McNally, S., & Tahir, I. (2022). *Education Inequalities*. <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Education-inequalities.pdf>

<sup>67</sup> Farquharson, C., McNally, S., & Tahir, I. (2022). *Education Inequalities*. <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Education-inequalities.pdf>



competitive, and like higher education, are often dominated by those from better-off homes.<sup>68</sup>

**Figure 23: Progression to higher education by POLAR Quintile.<sup>69</sup>**



Source: Department for Education

## Pastoral measures

Schools and colleges are not, of course, just about academic attainment and qualifications. They offer social and emotional support to young people, something that is particularly important to the most vulnerable who may have special needs, or a lack of support at home. Looking at the

<sup>68</sup> Cullinane, C., & Doherty, K. (2020, May 20). *Degree Apprenticeships: Levelling Up?* Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/levelling-up/>

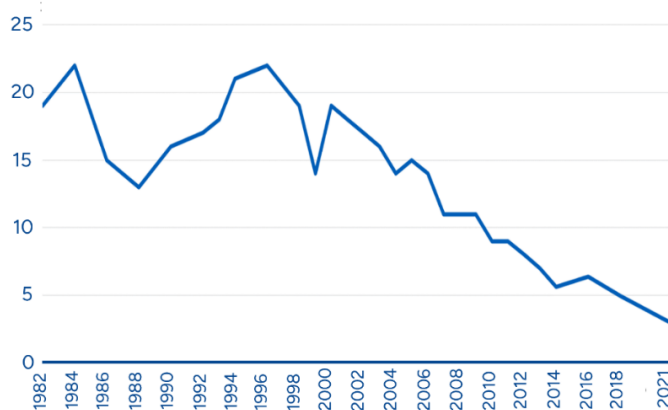
<sup>69</sup> Department for Education. (2023b, July 13). *Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2021/22*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education#releaseHeadlines-charts>

government's workforce survey, teachers are certainly doing more of this kind of support than at any point previously.<sup>70</sup>

If the picture on the academic side is broadly positive, albeit with the major caveat that the disadvantage gap has not been closed, things look more mixed when it comes to how students are faring pastorally. Abstracts terms like "wellbeing" and "happiness" are hard to measure across time and geographies because expectations change. But there are more concrete measures of change we can look at.

When it comes to negative behaviours – smoking, drinking, drug-taking, and unprotected sex – we can see that young people are engaging in these far less than in the past. The strongest trend is in smoking:

**Figure 24: Pupils who are current smokers, by year.<sup>71</sup>**



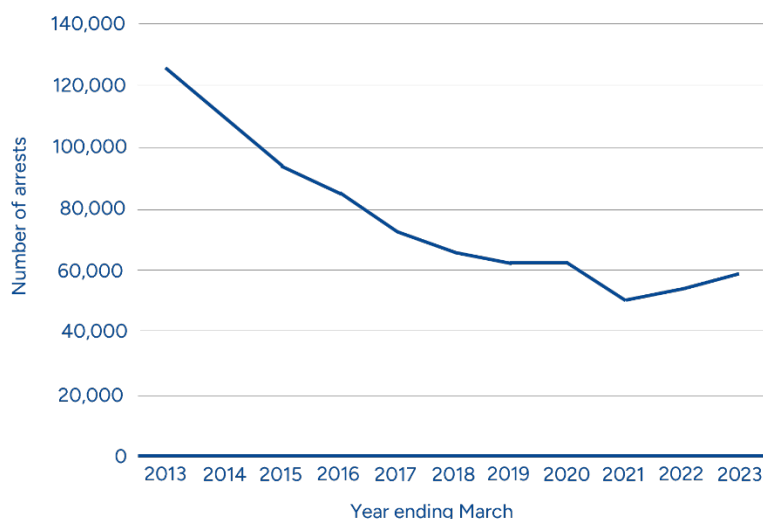
Source: NHS Digital

<sup>70</sup> Department for Education. (2023c, September 27). *Working lives of teachers and leaders: Wave 2 summary report*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-lives-of-teachers-and-leaders-wave-2/working-lives-of-teachers-and-leaders-wave-2-summary-report>

<sup>71</sup> NHS England. (2022, September 6). *Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People in England, 2021*. NHS England Digital. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/smoking-drinking-and-drug-use-among-young-people-in-england/2021>

But this is replicated for all these negative behaviours. The numbers of children involved in crime has also fallen dramatically, with arrests halving since 2012 (and a greater fall seen for young people than for arrests overall).

**Figure 25: Arrests of children for notable offences, England and Wales, Years ending March 2013 to 2023.<sup>72</sup>**



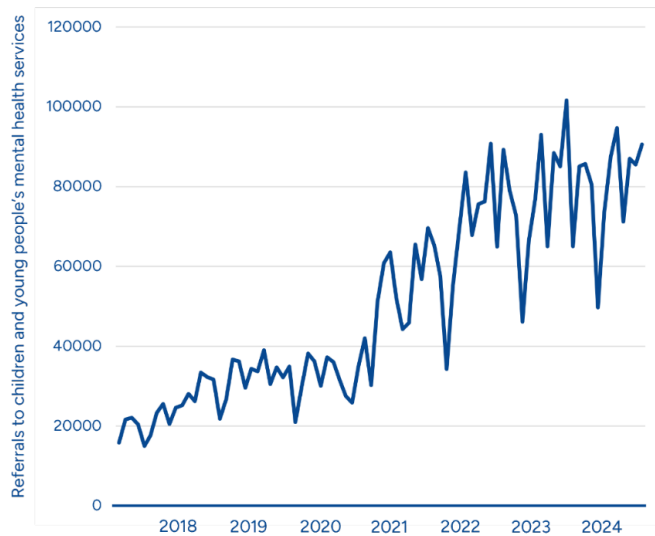
Source: Ministry of Justice

It's impossible to untangle the extent to which these changes are due to broader societal trends, like the rise of the internet and the higher cost of smoking and drinking. But it's certainly the case that over this period schools have exerted a lot more effort to try and reduce negative behaviours both through formal lessons and informal support.

The flipside to externalised behaviours improving is that increasing numbers of young people are struggling with mental health (see chart below).

<sup>72</sup> Youth Justice Board. (2024, January 25). *Youth Justice Statistics: 2022 to 2023 (accessible version)*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2022-to-2023/youth-justice-statistics-2022-to-2023-accessible-version>

**Figure 26: Referrals to children and young people’s mental health services over time.**<sup>73</sup>



Source: NHS Digital

Some of this increase may be due to changes in approaches to diagnosis and a greater willingness to talk about mental health. At the same time large increases in NHS admissions for physical harms related to mental illnesses like eating disorders and self-harm suggest a real phenomenon that cannot be explained away simply by changes in approach to diagnosis.<sup>74</sup> One hypothesis, of which Jonathan Haidt is the leading proponent, is that heavy use of social media has increased anxiety and reduced more healthy childhood activity. But this is disputed. Others argue it's due to changes in English education policy but this seems unlikely given it's a worldwide phenomenon.

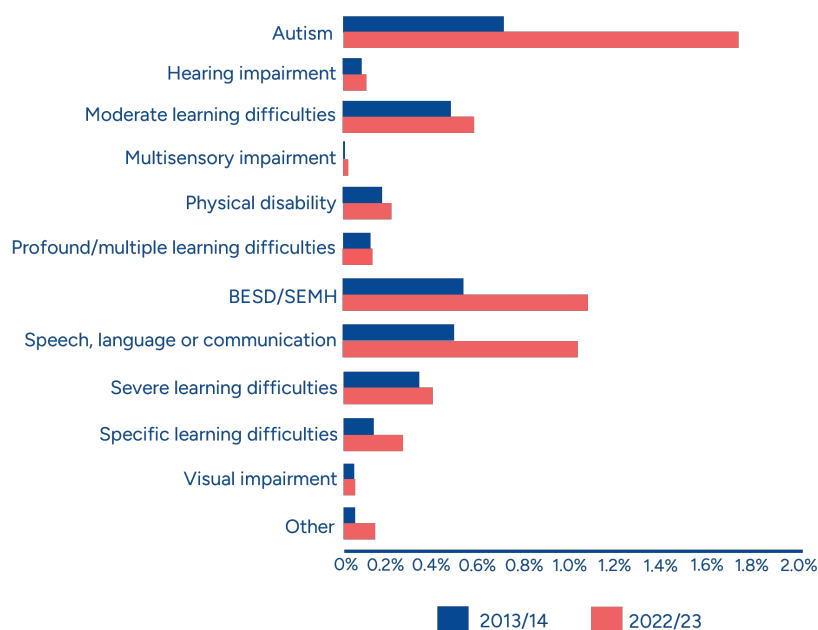
There has also been an increase in diagnosis of neurodiversity, including autism and ADHD (the number of young people with education and health

<sup>73</sup> NHS Digital. (2024). *Mental Health Services Monthly Statistics, Performance August 2024*. NHS England Digital. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-services-monthly-statistics/performance-august-2024>

<sup>74</sup> Children's Commissioner for England. (2023, July 31). *Young people with eating disorders in England on the rise*. Children's Commissioner for England. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/young-people-with-eating-disorders-in-england-on-the-rise/>

care plans for autism has more than doubled to over 130k since 2015).<sup>75</sup> And a big rise in other categories of Special Education Need and Disability (SEND) like “speech and communication” (see chart below). Again it is difficult to attribute causes to these very significant shifts because the diagnostic criteria are inevitably fuzzy. Rises are likely to be, at least in part, due to greater awareness and willingness to seek help. But it is also likely to be due to mainstream schools having fewer resources to support additional needs before they get to the stage of requiring a ECHP.

**Figure 27: Percentage (%) of Year 11 pupils with a statement/EHC plan by cohort and primary SEN type.<sup>76</sup>**



Source: FFT education datalab

Whatever the reason, together these issues are the major reason for the pressure on SEND funding, which is causing serious issues for most local authorities, and for the inability of Children and Adolescent Mental

<sup>75</sup> Department for Education. (2024b, June 20). *Special educational needs in England, Academic year 2023/24*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england>

<sup>76</sup> Thomson, D. (2024, July 9). *The rise and rise of Education, Health and Care Plans*. *FFT Education Datalab*. <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2024/07/the-rise-and-rise-of-education-health-and-care-plans/>

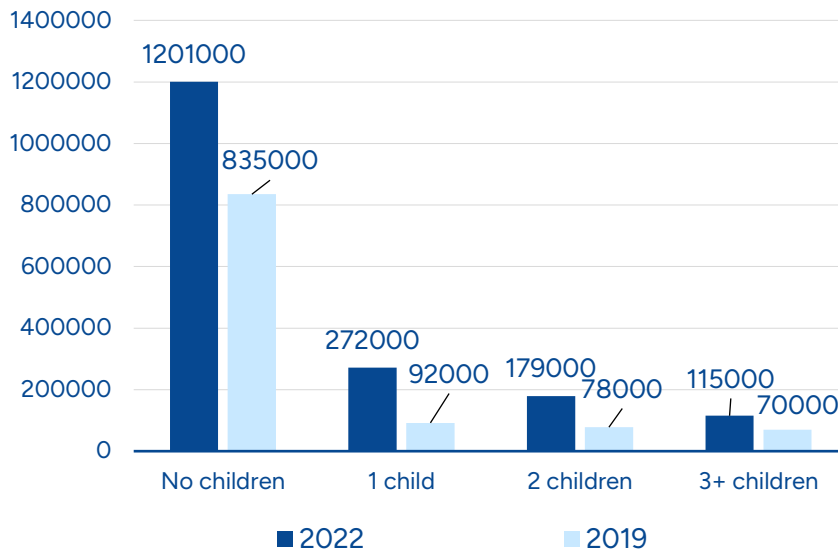
Services to provide adequate support in many parts of the country. Which in turn increases the pressure on untrained school staff who are left to pick up the pieces.

These pressures have, in turn, been exacerbated by rising economic deprivation. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation there are now over a million children living in their definition of deprivation – having either (or both) inadequate shelter or not enough to eat. A number that has more than doubled since 2019 as a result of the pandemic and the inflationary surge following the war in Ukraine (see chart below). Foodbank use has rocketed, with over 70% of schools now offering some kind of foodbank or food parcel support.<sup>77</sup> There has also been a huge increase in the number of homeless children living in temporary accommodation.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> NFER. (2024, June 5). *Nearly one-third of primary school teachers report more pupils showing up to class hungry*. National Foundation for Educational Research. <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/press-releases/nearly-one-third-of-primary-school-teachers-report-more-pupils-showing-up-to-class-hungry/>

<sup>78</sup> Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. (2024, April 30). *Statutory homelessness in England: July to September 2023*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-july-to-september-2023/statutory-homelessness-in-england-july-to-september-2023>

**Figure 28: Destitute households by number of children, 2022 and 2019.<sup>79</sup>**



Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Destitution in the UK 2023*

It's hard to imagine that these negative trends won't ultimately affect academic performance, and may indeed already be a big part of the reason the disadvantage gap appears to be widening again.

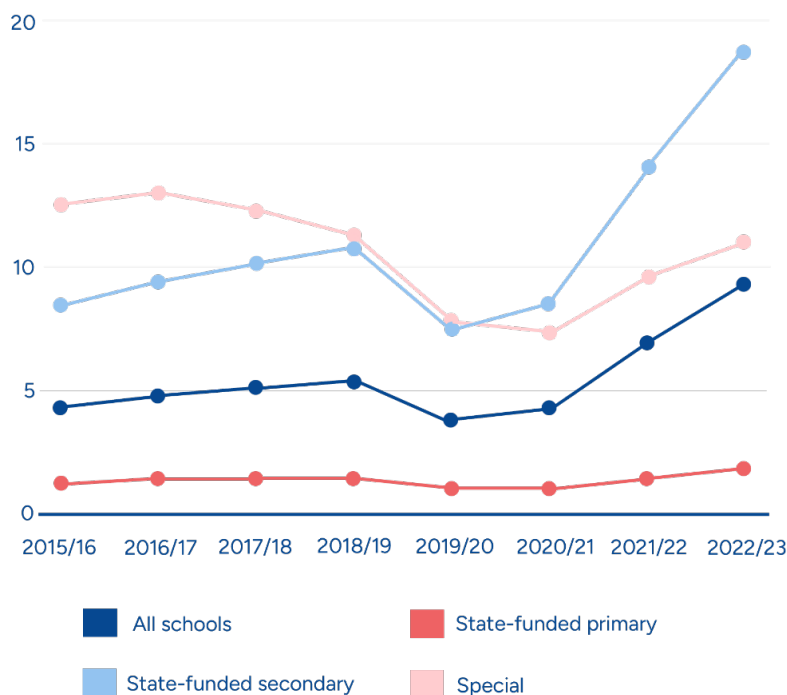
We can see that on various metrics schools are struggling more to provide adequate pastoral support, with inevitable knock on effects. Since the pandemic (which led to a further surge in mental health diagnoses) there has been a substantial increase in the number of students who are persistently absent from school (missing more than 10% of lessons). In 2018/18 12.7% of secondary students were persistently absent and this had jumped to 23.4% by 2023/24 (albeit this is a slight improvement from the post-pandemic peak).<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Fitzpatrick, S., Bramley, G., Treanor, M., Blenkinsopp, J., McIntyre, J., Johnsen, S., & McMordie, L. (2023, October 24). *Destitution in the UK 2023* | Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/deep-poverty-and-destitution/destitution-in-the-uk-2023>

<sup>80</sup> Department for Education. (2024e, October 17). *Pupil absence in schools in England, Autumn and spring term 2023/24*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england>

This is far worse for students on free school meals and those with SEND. Almost half of free school meals pupils in secondary schools were persistently absent last year.<sup>81</sup> We have also seen a large spike in suspensions from schools, indicating worsening behaviour, something supported by surveys from Teacher Tapp.<sup>82</sup>

**Figure 29: Rate of suspensions in schools over time.**<sup>83</sup>



Source: Department for Education

It is these measures, rather than academic ones, that of most concern to teachers and leaders at the moment. And it is these problems they are hoping a new government will address.

<sup>81</sup> Beynon, K. (2024, March 13). Attendance of disadvantaged pupils in disadvantaged secondary schools. *FFT Education Datalab*. <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2024/03/attendance-of-disadvantaged-pupils-in-disadvantaged-secondary-schools/>

<sup>82</sup> Wespieser, K. (2023, October 24). Burnout, the behaviour paradox, and locking the door. *Teacher Tapp*. <https://teachertapp.co.uk/articles/burnout-the-behaviour-paradox-and-locking-the-door/>

<sup>83</sup> Department for Education. (2023c, September 27). *Working lives of teachers and leaders: Wave 2 summary report*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-lives-of-teachers-and-leaders-wave-2/working-lives-of-teachers-and-leaders-wave-2-summary-report>



# The challenge for the new government

Labour have arrived in government to be confronted by an array of problems across almost every policy area, and very little money (partly due to their own political choices) to pay for solutions.

When it comes to schools and colleges some of the challenges they face are conceptually straightforward but cannot be dealt with without investment – such as improving teacher recruitment and restoring the run down school estate.

Others are conceptually more complex and offer more choices. Do they settle for the academic status quo with, perhaps, marginal tweaks to assessment, accountability, curriculum and school structures? Or do they try and identify an entirely new paradigm, now that we've wrung the potential benefits (and associated costs) out of the one we've been using for the 35 years?

Do they refocus on disadvantage, by increasing funding and accountability incentives for focusing on those from low-income families? Or do they decide that after an awful lot of effort it seems impossible to fix deep-seated societal issues through schooling alone? And that different policy levers, predominantly in the welfare space, are also needed for that?

What approach do they take to the negative trends around SEND, mental health, persistent absence and behaviour? A return to the "Every Child Matters" agenda and attempts to integrate services with schools as a central hub, or better resourcing the other agencies that are supposed to deal with these issues but are currently overwhelmed?

It is not the purpose of this paper to propose definitive answers to these questions but to give the background as to why they are the important ones to consider. But one way or another they do need to be tackled.

35 years of reform since 1988 have led to real improvements in standards, at least for maths, according to international tests, as well as a big increase in the numbers with post-16 qualifications and a much better reputation for schools. Compared to other public services this is a success story. But the risk is that a relatively positive story masks a growing array of challenges, especially around the lives of the most vulnerable pupils, and the impact this is having on schools and colleges.



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