National Governance Association
KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

Widening the lens on disadvantage

The governing board's role in tackling educational disadvantage

November 2022

This guide forms an introduction to NGA's series of toolkits for tackling disadvantage in education. Each practical toolkit identifies the link to educational disadvantage and signposts to relevant evidence, guidance and resources.



The expert organisation for school governors, trustees and governance professionals

Contents

A. What is meant by disadvantage? 3

B. 25 top tips for addressing educational disadvantage 5

C. Understanding disadvantage beyond attainment 9

D. Next steps: moving to a strategy 10

National Governance Association

The National Governance Association (NGA) is the membership organisation for governors, trustees and governance professionals of state schools in England.

We are an independent, not-for-profit charity that aims to improve the educational standards and wellbeing of young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. We are expert leaders in school and trust governance, providing information, advice and guidance, professional development and e-learning.

We represent the views of governors, trustees and governance professionals at a national level and work closely with, and lobby, UK government and educational bodies.

© National Governance Association 2022

A. What is meant by disadvantage?

Disadvantage in education is consistently reported as one of the biggest challenges that schools and trusts face. This persistent issue can take on multiple different forms. Regardless of the root cause, inequity in education leads to reduced life chances and missed opportunities for children and young people to fulfil their potential.

Governing boards have a pivotal role to play in ensuring that pupils in their schools and trusts who are at a disadvantage have the support they need to learn. Governors and trustees are expected to:

"consider how the school is going to raise standards for all children … [including] … those receiving free school meals and those who are more broadly disadvantaged."
The Governance Handbook

This expectation does not specify which pupils might be defined as "broadly disadvantaged". However, it clearly extends beyond those children eligible for the pupil premium.

Understanding disadvantage begins with the pupil premium

While the Department for Education (DfE) doesn't explicitly define 'disadvantage', it makes pupil premium funding available to schools to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils based on a socio-economic eligibility criteria.

- The pupil premium is paid for all pupils who claim free school meals, or who have claimed free meals in the last six years, and to those with no recourse to public funds.
- Pupil premium plus is paid for every pupil who has left local authority care through adoption, a special guardianship order or child arrangements order.
- A smaller service pupil premium is paid for every pupil with a parent serving in or retired from the forces, but they are explicitly excluded from the DfE's definition of disadvantage, and the funding is expected to be spent on pastoral and social support.

Schools do not have to spend pupil premium so it solely benefits eligible pupils; it can be used wherever they identify the greatest need. However, the success of closing the attainment gap is determined by the achievements of children who are eligible for pupil premium as compared with their peers. The use of pupil premium and how it is applied is explored in more detail in both NGA's poverty toolkit and pupil premium guidance.

In 2018, NGA published Spotlight on Disadvantage, a report exploring the role of governing boards in spending, monitoring and evaluating the pupil premium. The report was based on a self-selecting survey of 875 governors and trustees, supplemented by a thematic analysis of 36 pupil premium strategies from a wide range of schools. It concluded that receipt of pupil premium was not the only determinant of disadvantage; a more holistic approach was needed. It also highlighted a disconnect between the strategies adopted by schools and the barriers to learning identified.

© National Governance Association 2022

Although the majority of survey respondents defined 'disadvantaged' as those eligible for the pupil premium, other criteria being used in schools and trusts was reported, including:

- any child identified in-house as needing additional support
- children with special educational needs and/or disabilities
- those who speak English as an additional language or who are from a minority ethnic background
- pupils with a challenging home life
- those with prior attainment issues
- those with social, emotional and mental health needs
- pupils identified through a school's own socio-economic calculations

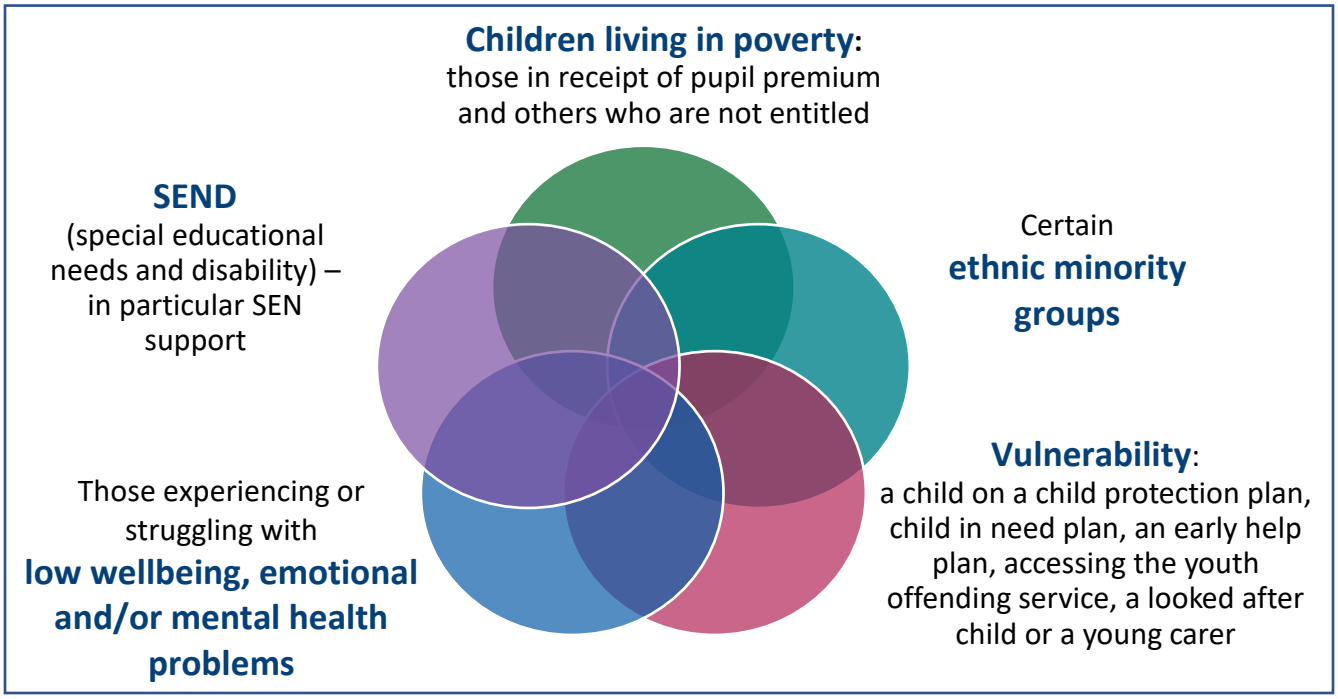
Understanding broader disadvantage beyond the pupil premium

Research shows that there are other groups of children who are overlooked in pursuit of closing the attainment gap who are statistically at a significant educational disadvantage.

NGA's tackling disadvantage in education toolkits have been developed on the basis that a wider definition is indeed needed. We are not attempting to provide an absolute definition of a disadvantaged child but aiming to establish a set of broadened parameters to enhance the governing board's ability to focus their support on all vulnerable pupils.

Five drivers of educational disadvantage

NGA has identified five drivers that are the focus of this phase of our work on disadvantage:



© National Governance Association 2022

These drivers put pupils at a higher risk of being impacted by educational inequity. NGA's toolkits explore the link between these pupil groups and educational disadvantage.

While each pupil group is addressed individually, there will be many pupils who fall into more than one of these categories. In section C we describe the data that should be explored in relation to these pupil groups in order to identify their needs.

There may be other groups that are relevant to your setting, and there are some other groups governing boards are expected to consider. For example, governing boards are also expected to consider the attainment gap between boys and girls; this is a topic we will cover in the future. We will also return to the topic of English as an additional language.

Spotting the gap: identifying disadvantage in your school or trust

Governing boards, together with their school and trust leaders, should be setting time aside to think about disadvantage outside of the pupil premium. Governing boards have freedom to explore what this means for their context, looking beyond the national narratives. Those closest to the school are best placed to know what type of disadvantage their pupils face.

Many strategies exist to address the issue of educational disadvantage; however, boards need to seek assurances from school and trust leaders that the organisation is able to correctly identify the key barriers that impact on pupils realising their full potential. A strategy mis-matched with pupil needs can be a waste of time and money and most importantly, a wasted opportunity for a pupil.

B. 25 top tips for addressing educational disadvantage

As we begin to unpack disadvantage further, Marc Rowland, adviser for improving outcomes for disadvantaged learners for the Unity Schools Partnership, sets out areas for governing boards to consider throughout the process of strategic planning, implementation and evaluation:

School culture, expectations, coherence, principles

1. **Remove the deficit discourse around disadvantage** and its impact on learning and participation in school life. Disadvantaged pupils and their families are not a problem to be solved. They are our school community and held in high regard. Work in partnership to ensure everyone feels they belong in all aspects of school life. Be mindful of the risk of a 'school within a school': where school life works for the vast majority of pupils, but a small number are on the margins.
2. **Secure a school-wide understanding of how disadvantage impacts on pupils' learning** and broader experiences in school. See school life through the lens of disadvantaged pupils and their families. This is important, irrespective of the numbers of disadvantaged pupils.
3. **Secure a school-wide understanding of the school's main priorities** for addressing disadvantage and how those priorities present across the curriculum and wider school life.

© National Governance Association 2022

4. **Focus on issues that are within the school's gift**. Focus on issues that are controllable. Limit priorities to those that are most preventing pupils from thriving in the classroom and in wider school life.

5. **Coherence and credibility are key to effective implementation** in the classroom. Professional development for staff – in academic and pastoral roles – should centre on helping staff to support disadvantaged pupils to thrive in school.

6. **Ensure that high-quality, experienced, expert staff are working equitably** with disadvantaged pupils, especially those that are lower current attainers. Recruitment, retention and development of staff are fundamental to an effective strategy. This requires a long-term view, with some schools adopting a 'pipeline' approach to teacher recruitment and putting in place high-quality professional development programmes for all staff, including teaching assistants, teachers of all levels of experience, middle and senior leaders. The same applies to staff in pastoral roles.

7. **Ensure, across school, that there is a clear, collective understanding** of, and a consistent language lexicon for:
   - high expectations
   - high-quality teaching
   - inclusivity

Assessment of need, evidence-informed responses

8. **Use research evidence to both inform decision-making and challenge plans** during planning and implementation. Link exploration of evidence to issues arising from a rigorous assessment of needs. Evidence should inform how schools respond to pupil need in the classroom and in wider school life. A research-informed approach without a rigorous assessment of need may take schools in the wrong direction. Planning and implementation should be firmly embedded in the realities of an individual school context.

9. **Assessment, not assumptions, are at the heart of an effective approach**. Assessment of need is not something that is only done before a strategy is implemented. It is a critical ingredient of an effective strategy. Start with the needs of the individual pupils and build a strategy around emerging themes and common issues. Avoid looking for themes to address with a ready-made solution. Pupil need, not labels, should inform all decision-making. Many pupils in our schools will be experiencing disadvantage who are not eligible for the pupil premium. Schools are best placed to determine how disadvantage impacts on pupils in their local communities. The impact of disadvantage on learning is a process, not an event. Neither is it static.

© National Governance Association 2022

Of course, families may not be significantly economically disadvantaged but may be exceptionally stretched/time-poor or impacted by factors outside of their control. Key questions to consider:

- How does disadvantage impact on pupils' learning (in the individual school context)?
- What are the 'controllable' factors impacting on disadvantaged pupils' learning?
- What factors are most preventing disadvantaged pupils from thriving in the classroom and in wider school life?

10. **Rigorous assessment promotes early intervention and ongoing support for pupils**. Early intervention, rooted in pupil need, that enables pupils to thrive in the classroom can prevent narrowing the curriculum and a reactive approach.

11. **Respond to assessment of need within teaching and learning, as well as interventions.** Identifying issues such as pupils' reading age should elicit a response across the curriculum, not just through reading interventions and whole school reading programmes.

12. **Build knowledge of high-quality practice** based on effective processes and implementation of evidence-informed strategies. How to do things matters.

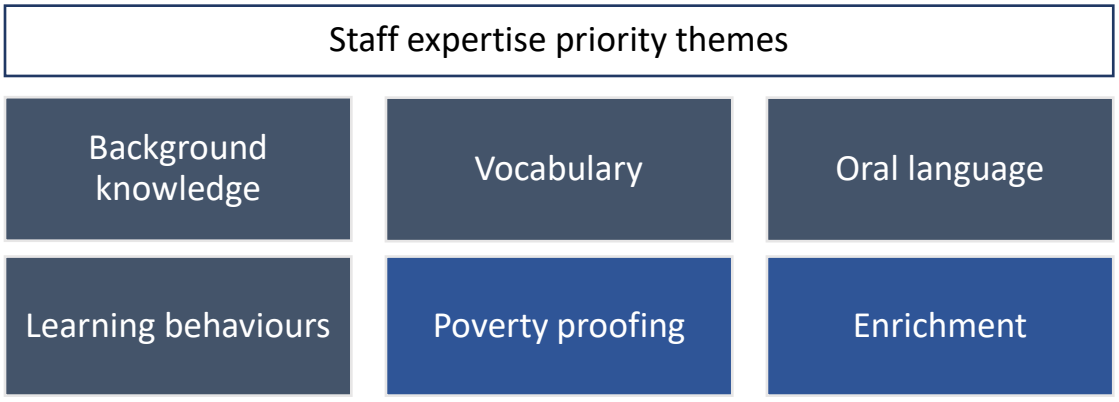
13. **Ensure that curriculum, subject, and pastoral leaders are heavily involved** in the planning and implementation of the school's disadvantage strategy as early as possible. Staff in these roles are fundamental to long-term success. Ensure expertise is well utilised.

14. **Ensure that the appropriate administrative staff are involved** in the planning and implementation stages. Again, these staff are fundamental to long-term success.

15. **Streamline approaches by working with external expert partners** – both for academic and pastoral approaches. Avoid too many priorities.

Priorities and partnerships

16. **Build staff expertise** around high priority themes to help pupils to be better learners.



© National Governance Association 2022

17. **Build partnership and harness local expertise**. Supplement teacher expertise. Look for area-based solutions for:
    - curriculum enrichment – museums, theatre, music
    - proactive physical and mental health support through expert partners
    - academic support – tuition programmes
    - school development through partnership (LAs, research schools, hubs, other school improvement providers). Also, within and across multi academy trusts and with other partners – for teacher expertise, coaching, peer review and dispassionate quality assurance.
18. **Improve reading standards.** Pupils will read with the breadth, depth and frequency they need to thrive in the classroom if they become strong readers. Our efforts to address disadvantage pivot on how well pupils develop their reading comprehension skills.
19. **Poverty proofing is a key ingredient of inclusive schools** where disadvantaged pupils are thriving. This should cover both the formal and informal curriculum, as well as uniform, equipment and other resources.
20. **Access to the curriculum is not dependent on family resources or income** – for example, field studies in geography.
21. **Pupils should be supported to have good friends and have meaningful interactions** with peers across socioeconomic groups.
22. **Pupils should have excellent careers education** and be involved in meaningful enrichment opportunities. High-quality careers education should not rely on personal networks or social capital. Pupils should play a strong role in wider school – and have strong leadership roles. This can be done through early (and ongoing) involvement in activities that promote self-efficacy and belonging. Being involved in teams (not just sport) and student councils that promote pupil voice on a range of issues can help pupils to feel confident and empowered. Belonging and a sense of place at school should go beyond the classroom.
23. **Schools are enhanced and enriched through inclusivity**. Inclusion improves schools. It enhances our values and our practices.

Evaluation and implementation

24. **Governors and trustees should play a key role in rigorous, dispassionate impact evaluation**. Decouple impact evaluation from accountability. Evaluation is understanding whether strategies are working, not proving that they are. Evaluation frameworks should be put in place at the start of implementation, not done retrospectively.
25. **Adopt evidence informed approaches to implementation**, remembering that the practitioner is the intervention. The EEF guidance resources are the gold standard for this. Again, implementation plans should be rooted firmly in an individual school's context.

© National Governance Association 2022

C. Understanding disadvantage beyond attainment

The focus on the attainment gap has understandably been at the centre of tackling disadvantage, and it is of course a good place to start. Children attend school to receive an education and to be equipped with the tools they need to progress onto their next stage in life and become functioning members of society. But while at school, children with disadvantages are more likely to face other challenges, such as higher rates of exclusion, challenges with their mental health and poor attendance.

A great place to start is the data that already exists, especially as governing boards need to consider the workload of leaders and other staff. Your setting will collect both **progress and attainment** data of all pupils, as well as data on **behaviour, safeguarding, exclusions** and **attendance**. These are all important indicators of how well a pupil may be thriving at school.

Most management information systems enable school staff to filter this data by key pupil groups. This in turn enables you to drill down beyond surface level data and identify any patterns and variations between pupil groups at risk of educational disadvantage.

Activity

Use the prompts below to make an assessment of the data that your school/trust currently collects for each pupil group. Are there any gaps in your monitoring that may need to be addressed?

Pupil groups
SEND
Ethnicity
Vulnerable
Mental health and wellbeing
Pupil premium

Relevant data
Progress and attainment
Attendance
Safeguarding incidences
Behaviour incidences
Pupil and parent voice

Looking at the pupil groups that are statistically more likely to be at an educational disadvantage than their peers, consider:

- Does the data show more behaviour incidents among a particular pupil group than their peers?
- If so, is there a common presenting behaviour type?
- Is the attendance of this pupil group below average?
- In relation to progress and/or attainment, are they making the correct level of progress in line with their baseline assessments and flight path?

© National Governance Association 2022

D. Next steps: moving to a strategy

As covered in the top tips, once the needs are identified at school level, school leaders will need to consider the needs of individual pupils. It is that need, not labels or official definitions, which must act as the main driver for the choice of strategies for tackling educational disadvantage at the school/trust. Strategies should:

- be directly linked to the trust/school's vision, values, ethos and culture
- ensure every child is equipped to learn – this includes mental health, physical health, cognitive development, academic development, identity development and social emotional development
- draw on the evidence (including benchmarking with others) and research
- draw on the views of parents, carers and the local community
- include the CPD needs of boards, leaders and staff
- review trust/school policies and organisational practice in light of the findings

NGA's work on educational disadvantage

We are developing a toolkit for each of our identified drivers of disadvantage:



We want these toolkits to be as practical as they possibly can be, and this first iteration will be revised following feedback from NGA members during the spring terms at our series of governance leadership forums. For more information and to book onto these events, visit www.nga.org.uk/events.

© National Governance Association 2022