National Governance Association
KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

Tackling disadvantage in education

A toolkit for governing boards

November 2022

Poverty



The expert organisation for school governors, trustees and governance professionals

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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.

With thanks to Child Poverty Action Group

NGA would like to thank Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) for providing their expertise and support in the production of this toolkit.

CPAG work on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. They work to understand what causes poverty, the impact it has on children's lives, and how it can be prevented and solved – for good.

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How to use this toolkit

This toolkit is part of a series aimed at tackling disadvantage in education. It identifies the link between poverty and educational disadvantage, signposts resources to help tackle disadvantage, and includes questions for governing boards to explore.

We recommend that you first read our Widening the lens guidance which explains how to identify key areas of disadvantage in your organisation. Other toolkits in this series include **special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)**, **mental health and wellbeing**, **vulnerability** and **ethnicity**.

Making the link

The link between educational disadvantage and poverty is well documented. On average, the academic performance of pupils from families with lower socio-economic status falls below that of their more affluent peers.

The pupil premium grant has helped to cement this link and is widely used as a starting point to define disadvantage in schools. However, many children who are living in poverty are not eligible for free school meals (FSM) and do not qualify for pupil premium funding.

A child is considered to be growing up in 'relative poverty' if they live in a household whose income is below 60% of the average (median) income. Children who fall outside pupil premium eligibility but are considered to be living in poverty may not be readily identified and could miss out on targeted pupil premium strategies.

What the evidence shows

- 75% of children currently growing up in poverty live in a household where at least one adult is working (Research Briefing on Poverty in the UK).
- 31% (800,000) of children in England are living in poverty but not entitled to free school meals (Anstey *et al.,* 2021).
- Pupils eligible for free school meals made less progress between 11 and 16 years old than those not eligible for FSM (Office for National Statistics, 2020).
- By the time they take their GCSEs, disadvantaged pupils (those who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years) are over 18.1 months of learning behind their peers. This gap is the same as it was five years ago (Education Policy Institute, 2020).
- At primary school, the gap between poorer pupils and their peers is 9.3 months. An increase for the first time since at least 2007. This could be a turning point, in which the disadvantage gap now continues to widen at this phase (Education Policy Institute, 2020).
- For pupils in their reception year, the learning gap has stagnated at 4.6 months, having largely stayed the same since 2013 (Education Policy Institute, 2020).

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Understanding poverty in your context

The challenge for governing boards and school leaders is to understand how poverty impacts their school or trust community and who is at increased risk of experiencing poverty, without being overly reliant on pupil premium eligibility.

Questions to explore:

- What does poverty look like in your school? Who does it affect and how are you addressing it/using this information?
- What support does your school offer to families struggling financially and how do you monitor and measure the impact of this support?
- How do you ensure that all families that are eligible for free school meals are registered? What support do you offer with applications?
- Have you considered the hidden costs families are faced with such as uniform, schools meals, PE kits, trips, learning resources, stationary etc?

Resources and recommendations

- End Child Poverty data shows child poverty levels and how they vary across nations, regions, local authorities and parliamentary constituencies. Explore the available interactive tools and data to understand child poverty levels in your area.
- The cost of the school day in England: pupils' perspectives provides a deeper understanding of what school life is like for children living in poverty. Filled with the words of children and young people, it highlights some of the positive work being carried out by schools to ensure that opportunities are affordable and inclusive.
- Turning the page on poverty is a useful starting point for all staff, including non-teaching staff. It includes information on the nature, causes, extent and impact of poverty on children and contains useful reflection schools for staff to consider how they can be more poverty-aware in their own practice. The Sec-Ed tackling the consequences of poverty podcast also provides a good starting point for raising awareness of poverty among staff.

Resources for increasing pupil premium impact

- NGA pupil premium guide for governing boards – guidance on determining the effective ways their school can use the pupil premium.
- NGA pupil premium questions for governing boards to ask – a range of examples that governors and trustees may want to ask in meetings or monitoring visits.
- Spotlight on disadvantage – NGA's research report explores the governing board's role in spending, monitoring and evaluating the pupil premium.
- The EEF guide to the pupil premium – a practical guide to support schools to develop their pupil premium strategy based on evidence and meet DfE requirements.

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Wider school culture

Questions to explore:

- How do you ensure that pupils in receipt of free school meals have parity of experience at lunchtime with their peers and what evidence do you use to assess this?
- Are levels of dinner money debt monitored by the governing board? Is the governing board aware of how dinner money debt is managed in a way that does not further disadvantage or stigmatise children?
- What is our ambition for the attainment and progress of pupils impacted by poverty?

Policies

Governors and trustees have responsibility for setting policies relating to aspects of the school day that incur a direct cost for families and as such have an impact on pupils living in poverty. Monitoring and analysing how these policies are put into practice and how they impact on the experience that pupils have while at school should be an area of consideration for boards.

Questions to explore:

- As a board do you have an idea of how much it costs families to fully participate in all that your school offers? Is it affordable and accessible to all?
- What monitoring and data analysis do you undertake to determine to what extent there is equality of experience and opportunity at your school?
- How do you ensure that your policies are inclusive for low-income families?
- How does curriculum planning ensure that pupils experiencing poverty are not financially excluded from a wide range of school subjects, activities and trips? For example, PE, music, swimming, art and design, food technology.
- Does your current charging and remissions policy detail where charges can be requested as well as support available to families that are finding school costs challenging?

Resources and recommendations

- NGA guidance on developing an affordable school uniform policy.
- School uniform: Develop affordable and inclusive uniform policies. More practical ideas on how to achieve this are available here: Affordable school uniforms: a guide.
- To calculate and review the current costs in your school see Turning the Page on Poverty.

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Staff training and CPD

Governing boards and school leaders should have confidence that staff understand indicators of poverty, know how poverty can impact academic attainment and can ensure barriers to participation in the school day are minimised.

Questions to explore:

- Does the whole staff team have awareness of how poverty impacts on children and families? What training have staff undertaken on poverty?
- Is the governing board and staff workforce aware of the financial barriers the school day can present to pupils and their families?

Resources and recommendations

- Children North East at info@povertyproofing.co.uk and Child Poverty Action Group at UKcosd@cpag.co.uk provide training to raise awareness of poverty.
- Founder of Equity Literacy Institute, Paul Gorski published an article on building a pedagogy of engagement for students living in poverty

Engaging with families

In the latest NGA annual survey, only 38% of respondents stated that their governing boards considered the views of disadvantaged pupils and their families. Providing opportunities for young people and parents experiencing poverty to share their experiences is crucial to inform planning and strategy development and to ensure that schools are inclusive and that all children can succeed.

Questions to explore:

- How do you ensure that you gather the views of children and parents from low-income families to inform school plans, strategies and visions?
- What opportunities are there for parents and pupils to give their feedback on school costs?
- How do you ensure that pupils do not face poverty-related stigma in you school?
- How does your school/trust ensure that relationships are developed between parents from different communities?

Resources and recommendations

- Online survey templates are available to help understand how families in your school or trust manage school costs.
- Talking about Costs and Money is a resource designed to open up or enhance a whole school conversation about costs and money.
- NGA's guidance on parental engagement provides tips and insight into how governing boards can enhance and build on their engagement with parents.

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Further reading

- Poverty in the UK: statistics from the House of Commons Library sets out information on the levels of poverty in the UK, including trends and forecasts, as well as poverty by various characteristics.
- Fixing lunch: the case for expanding free school meals – a report highlighting the problems with existing free school meals provision.
- The long shadow of deprivation: differences in opportunities – research report from the Social Mobility Commission highlighting the differences in social mobility opportunities within local areas in England.
- Child poverty and education outcomes by ethnicity – Office for National Statistics report exploring how child poverty and educational outcomes vary for different ethnic groups.
- Education in England: Annual Report 2020 – Education Policy Institute report on the state of education in England, including the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

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