

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds](#), HC 279

Tuesday 9 February 2021

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Fleur Anderson; Apsana Begum; Jonathan Gullis; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; David Johnston; Ian Mearns; David Simmonds; Christian Wakeford.

Questions 349 - 411

Witnesses

[I](#): Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for School Standards; and Vicky Ford MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP and Vicky Ford MP.

Q349 **Chair:** Good morning, Ministers. Thank you for coming to our Committee today. For the benefit of the tape and those watching on Parliament TV, could you introduce yourselves and your titles, please?

Vicky Ford: I am Vicky Ford, Member of Parliament and the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families in the Department for Education.

Nick Gibb: I am Nick Gibb. I am the Minister of State for School Standards.

Q350 **Chair:** Thank you. We are obviously going to ask about our inquiry into white working class boys and girls, but I will ask you a couple of questions related to covid and schools. You will have seen Public Health England's report, which was highlighted in *The Times*, saying that they are now safe, and the chief schools investigator said, "Everything we have learnt from the summer half term and the recent autumn term indicates that they are safe to remain open." Given what Public Health England has said—and I agree that it is absolutely important to follow the science and I have tried to do that—can you set out if any consideration is being given to opening primary schools after the February half term, or even at least some years in primary schools?

Nick Gibb: The reason why schools were closed from 5 January onwards was nothing to do with whether or not schools themselves are safe. The system of controls that schools implement when they are open, and indeed as they are open now to vulnerable children and the children of critical workers, is about hygiene, cleanliness, ventilation, one-way systems, staggered breaks and so on. That whole system of controls, as advised by Public Health England, is designed to ensure that we do everything we can to minimise the risk of transmitting the virus within the school environment.

The reason why schools were closed to most pupils, although as I say still open to vulnerable children and the children of critical workers, is about minimising movement in the community. It is the additional thing after we have adopted all the other tier 4-type measures in closing non-essential stores, pubs, gyms and so on. It is another way of minimising movement and activity in the community to reduce the transmission in the community. That is the reason why we have restricted access to schools and nothing to do with whether schools themselves are a safe environment.

The Prime Minister made it very clear on 27 January that we would not be reopening schools to most pupils earlier than 8 March, and in that week beginning 22 February we will be making further announcements about



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the roadmap to emerging from lockdown. That will include the roadmap for schools as well.

Q351 **Chair:** Could I ask you about the catch-up fund? The £300 million announced by the Prime Minister is new money; is that correct?

Nick Gibb: Yes, it is.

Q352 **Chair:** It is on top of the £1 billion that was over two years?

Nick Gibb: Yes.

Q353 **Chair:** That is very good news. Has any consideration been given to extending the school day, using the catch-up money, not necessarily asking teachers or support staff to do it, recognising the extra burden that they would face, but inviting in civil society, sporting groups, mental health charities and the tutoring groups? We know that already something like 39% of academies that were founded pre-2010 have extended school days. We know that it increases educational attainment by up to two months if there are after-school activities and has a hugely positive impact on mental health. Has any consideration been given to those ideas, in the beginning at least using some of the catch-up money that you have announced?

Nick Gibb: You are quite right, one of the great joys of the academies programme is the professional autonomy that it gives to schools. Many of the academies have used those freedoms to extend the school day and, as a consequence, have driven up standards in those schools. Indeed, they have helped to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

We have appointed Sir Kevan Collins to be the Education Recovery Commissioner, as you know. He will be looking at all these ideas and potential proposals for how we can ensure that young people catch up. As a Government, we are absolutely determined that no child or young person will have a long-term detriment to their life chances as a consequence of this pandemic. That is why we have, as you pointed out, allocated £1.3 billion of funding to the catch-up premium and to the National Tutoring Programme to make sure that we are doing everything we can to help young people catch up from lost education.

Q354 **Chair:** Just to understand, will the £300 million that is going to schools for the catch-up with the other £650 million pot go towards the National Tutoring Programme with the £350 million pot?

Nick Gibb: When it was announced, it was referred to as a tutoring fund. We will announce shortly how we allocate that fund in detail. We want to give Sir Kevan as wide a remit as possible in how we ensure that the best approach is taken to catch-up. The £650 million is distributed to schools on the basis of £80 per pupil and, as Vicky will point out, £240 per pupil in special schools.

Q355 **Chair:** Can the £300 million that the Prime Minister announced be used



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for sporting activities and mental health as well as tutoring, or is it just tutoring?

Nick Gibb: We want to make sure that that extra £300 million is used in the most effective way and we will be making announcements about that shortly. We will also be leaning on the advice of Sir Kevan Collins, who is very experienced in education. He ran the Education Endowment Foundation, of course, which was established to—

Q356 **Chair:** In a nutshell, it is not rigidly tied?

Nick Gibb: It is not rigid.

Chair: Vicky, just before you come in, I will bring in Fleur because she wants to ask specifically about the catch-up fund, and then I will let you answer.

Q357 **Fleur Anderson:** This could be to either of you. It is about the access to the catch-up fund for state-maintained nurseries. Nurseries in primary schools have access to the catch-up fund, but up until now state-maintained nurseries have not had access to the catch-up fund and seem to have been left out. Do they have access now to the catch-up fund to enable that crucial early years catch-up to be attained by the state-maintained nurseries?

Vicky Ford: We have kept nurseries and pre-schools open during this pandemic, this particular lockdown. We have focused the catch-up on those children who have missed out on their education, but the very youngest, of course, cannot be cared for online, which is one of the reasons why we have kept it open for them. That is why the catch-up has, on the whole, been focused on school-age programmes.

A really important part of the catch-up is the NELI programme, the Nuffield early language programme, which is focusing on children of reception age who have fallen behind in their communication and language skills. Over 40% of schools across the country have signed up for that NELI programme. It is a really important part of the catch-up. It is the one evidence-based intervention that we have to help very young children and that is why we have focused on that.

On the wider catch-up, yes, it is important that it can be used for wellbeing as well as education, because wellbeing is so important for children to be able to learn. Sir Kevan has been working with us on the SEND review. He is very focused on children with special educational needs, and within the National Tutoring Programme 26 of our 33 providers are also specialists in SEND catch-up. Seventeen of the 33 will also be providing to special schools or can also provide to special schools as well as mainstream. Even within the National Tutoring Programme there is support for the more vulnerable.

Q358 **Chair:** Not all but a lot of the questions will be directed to Nick because we know we have you for the second hour as well, Vicky. We are lucky



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that we have you for two hours.

Nick, I mentioned about extending the school day. Do you have a preference for perhaps extending the school day or some holidays being curtailed? Have you been thinking about these ideas, or are you just going to leave it all to Sir Kevan?

Nick Gibb: Sir Kevan will advise Ministers and then Ministers will take a decision about the best approach. I am open to all ideas. We have to leave no stone unturned in making sure that we can help those young people catch up from the lost education. Schools have been working tremendously hard since we went into lockdown—all the lockdowns—to provide a high-quality remote education from a standing start in March. This is not something that schools routinely did. However good the remote education is, it is never as good as having a child in the classroom with their teacher and their friends, being motivated with feedback constantly, and so on. That is why there will be catch-up for all pupils.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to bring in Jonathan Gullis about the school holidays.

Q359 **Jonathan Gullis:** The research shows the importance of a four-week summer break over a six-week summer break in helping to avoid the widening of the attainment gap. That is going to be more important than ever before due to the fact that kids, as you say, Nick, have been out of the classroom. Are there lessons from covid for that type of working that the DfE might be willing to look at in the future? I have done a report for Onward, by the way, on that four-week summer break. There are lots of schools telling me that there are many things in how their schools are run that they want to adopt longer term when schools return to normal. Are there things that the DfE is looking at like the extended school day, which I support, and the shortening of the school holidays, which I also support, that we can look to bring into policy in the future?

Chair: I think that what you are going to say is that you are open to all ideas. Is that the answer?

Nick Gibb: I was going to add that there is evidence of lost learning during that period. There is also evidence about how swiftly children can catch up in the autumn. We are learning a huge amount from what has been happening during this pandemic and, as you say, Robert—you took the words out of my mouth—we will look at all ideas to ensure that we can help children catch up.

Vicky Ford: A crucial thing that we are doing is rolling out the holiday activities and food programme. The evidence we have from the past three years of pilot programmes is that that helps keep young people engaged in activities. Not necessarily educational activities, but being engaged in activities over that summer period brings them back in September more ready to learn. The point of the holiday activities and



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food project and rolling that across the summer is to stop the attainment gap springing wider during the summer holidays, so it is really important.

Q360 Chair: As you will know, being a near neighbouring MP, we have seen it in Essex Council—kids in my area going in to learn STEM as well as do sports and mental health activities. I think that it is a good thing if that could be replicated.

Finally, before I pass to Ian Mearns, you have obviously looked at the disadvantage that white working-class boys and girls face in every single part of the education system, from early years right through to university. I want to get a view from both of you briefly of why you think this is the case. What analysis have you done on this and why is this the case?

Nick Gibb: Addressing this attainment gap has been the driving force of everything we have been doing since 2010. We were very conscious that the attainment gap was widening before 2010, and it is a combination of low expectations and a fatalistic assumption that the gap between wealthy backgrounds and poorer backgrounds was something that could not be closed. We never accepted that. That is why we have introduced all the reforms that we have, whether it was the teaching of reading, the approach to maths teaching, the EBacc performance measure that ensures that more young people are taking the core group of academic subjects at GCSE that are taken for granted in wealthier areas.

If you look at some of the figures of the EBacc, in 2011 only 7.9% of free school meal children were taking that academic core of English, maths, two sciences, a humanity and a foreign language. That has now risen to 25% among that group, still not high enough, but certainly much higher than it was in 2011. The same with phonics: only 44% of children on free school meals were achieving the expected standard in reading through the phonics check in 2012. That is now at 70%; again, not high enough, but certainly a lot higher than it was. If you look at some of these schools, like Michaela, Dixons Trinity Academy in Bradford and the Harris Academy in Bermondsey, which have very disadvantaged intakes, they are achieving stratospherically high academic results. They demonstrate that with high expectations, strong behaviour policies and a knowledge-rich curriculum in those schools, you can deliver the quality of education we expect.

Q361 Chair: I do not have any disagreement with any of that, but I am asking the why. Why are white working class boys and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds underperforming in every single stage of the education system compared to most other ethnic groups and their better-off peers?

Nick Gibb: As Teach First says in its written submission to you, the fact that unites pupils who perform worst in schools is not the colour of their skin but poverty. It is poverty that then translates into a poverty of low expectations and the fatalistic assumption that somehow those children should have a different curriculum and a different set of expectations



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than children from wealthier backgrounds. We have fought tooth and nail since 2010 to change that.

I can trot out all kinds of stats that show that we are beginning to make that change and close that attainment gap because we have taken this approach, and the case studies of the schools I have mentioned—there are many others; Reach Academy Feltham, for example—where they have managed to close the attainment gap, not completely but significantly, as a consequence of taking this non-fatalistic approach of high expectations and a proper curriculum for all children. In the maths curriculum, we take a mastery approach so every child is doing the same curriculum.

Q362 **Chair:** You are talking about remedies, but I am just trying to understand the why bit.

Nick Gibb: The why is the assumption that these children should not have the same diet, the same curriculum, as other children. We all have to resist that.

Vicky Ford: There have been three very detailed studies to try to work out what markers there are between attainment and other impacts on the families. The biggest link, the biggest correlation, is between lower income families and attainment. That is why we have focused our energies on supporting those children on free school meals or those from more deprived families in everything that we have done, from early years up, to close the attainment gap. That is why things like giving the 15 hours of free childcare to two year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds has absolutely been focused on closing it, focusing not on colour of skin but on what we know is the most strongly correlated measure, which is income.

Chair: Okay. I am going to move to Ian Mearns now. You have given the remedies, they may be the right ones, but I do not think that either of you have answered the why question, specifically on white working class boys and girls.

Q363 **Ian Mearns:** Minister, I think that it is quite refreshing to get ministerial recognition of the widespread existence of significant levels of poverty among our children. I find that an important starting point in this whole debate and strategy to try to recover the educational prospects of our children. A previous iteration of this Committee looked at this issue and raised it in 2014. We have heard evidence about the extent to which disadvantaged white children are being left behind in education. However, other than outlining statistics, the Department's submission to the inquiry does little to address this group specifically. Given that your written submission contains few references to white pupils specifically, do you find it problematic to specify initiatives to support this group? What has been done specifically to support the attainment of disadvantaged white pupils since the Education Committee raised this in 2014?

Chair: Nick, could you be as concise as possible, please?



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Nick Gibb: Yes, I will be precise. It is poverty and it is not the colour of the skin, white or not white, that is the issue. That is a submission that you have had from Teach First and that is a group that really does know about disadvantage because it focuses its recruitment on placing highly able young graduates into areas of disadvantage. You have the written response from Ofsted saying a similar thing.

What we have been focusing on since 2010 is making sure that young people who come from a disadvantaged background, regardless of the colour of their skin, have a much better quality of education. What Ofsted has said in its submissions is, "It cannot be ignored that a large percentage of these children are attending schools where the quality of education is low and, in some cases, has been for some time." That is the issue that we have been addressing. Everything we have done, from reading and maths, the curriculum, behaviour policy, the autonomy given to academies and to the free school programme, is all about addressing this poverty of aspiration for those children. As a consequence of that, we will see white disadvantaged children benefit. We have seen the attainment gap closing by 13% in primary schools and by 9% in secondary schools. That will benefit white disadvantaged children as well as disadvantaged children from different ethnic backgrounds.

Q364 **Ian Mearns:** Minister, from that analysis it seems to me that by quoting the Teach First evidence you are saying that this is an issue of poverty and there is not a specific issue about white poorer or white working class kids in particular. Have you done any regional variation analysis on that to see if there are any problems in particular regions? For instance, in my constituency here in Gateshead, I have, by comparison to the national average, a relatively low population of people from black and minority ethnic communities. Have you done any analysis on a regional level to flesh that out, to make sure that that is not just a broad-brush, one-size-fits-all attitude towards the whole question?

Nick Gibb: One of the issues in my view is the curriculum. A knowledge-rich curriculum is absolutely key, certainly up to the age of 16. As I said before, when we came into office only 7.9% of children on free school meals were taking the EBacc combination of those core academic subjects, and that has risen to 25.1%, although that is not high enough. When you look across the country, in places like Newham 63% of all children are taking the EBacc combination compared to 40% nationally. Newham is getting more of its children from all backgrounds and all wealth disparities taking that combination. If you go to Blackpool, it is 21%. If you go to Hartlepool, it is 22%; Middlesbrough 22%, Oldham 23%. That is the problem. There is regional disparity. Places like Newham, Southwark, 63%, and Brent, 65%, are taking the core academic subjects that keep the options open. If you take that core combination of GCSEs, it is more likely then you will be taking A-levels or equivalents that will get you into the highest tariff universities.

Q365 **Ian Mearns:** There is some cause and effect stuff within that, Minister.



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You are comparing Southwark and Newham with Hartlepool, Middlesbrough and Blackpool. The economic and social conditions are rather different. I am not saying they are any better or worse, but they are different in those areas. The overall pervading jobs market is very different in those areas as well.

Nick Gibb: Newham is one of the poorest boroughs in the country and it managed to get 63% of its children taking those core academic subjects, so I do not accept that there is any reason, due to the economic differences in the country, why you could not have a higher proportion taking that combination of core academic subjects in Blackpool as you can in Newham. I just don't accept it.

It is about expectations, behaviour policy, good teaching and a good curriculum. If you provide those things, you can transform the life chances of young people. Don't take my word for it. As a Committee, please—I am sure you may have done already—go and visit some of these schools that are doing it in the most disadvantaged parts of the country: Dixons Trinity Academy, Michaela in Brent. These schools are closing the attainment gap. They are delivering precisely what this Committee is seeking to do with this inquiry.

Vicky Ford: On the original premise of your question, which was why we are not just focusing on white working class boys, if we were only focusing on boys we would risk overlooking girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, who often also underperform at school.

Chair: No, Vicky, our inquiry is looking at both.

Ian Mearns: I never mentioned boys or girls, just pupils.

Vicky Ford: I think that it is important, Robert, that we also focus on and recognise that there are other ethnic groups, such as Gypsy/Roma or black Caribbean, which show underperformance. The biggest correlation is with disadvantage, which is why we have invested especially in the early years. The outcomes for that are phenomenal. We have gone from having just one in two children at a good state of readiness for school at age five to now nearly three out of four. For white pupils on free school meals, the proportion that are now achieving a good state of readiness has gone up from one in three to about one in two, which is a massive increase.

Chair: Yes, we have acknowledged all the time in our inquiry the position of Roma children and some Afro-Caribbean children, but for the most part white working class boys and girls are way behind most other ethnic groups. The key point was why.

What I am going to do now, because we have to get on, is ask David Johnston, Tom Hunt and Jonathan Gullis to ask questions. Could you ask your questions together and I will get the Minister to answer them? Tom Hunt first, please, then I will bring in David Johnston and then Jonathan Gullis, and I will get the Minister to answer all three together.



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Q366 Tom Hunt: The inquiry is on white working class pupils eligible for free school meals. It is on boys and girls, and that has been a part of every session that I have been in. This inquiry was set up because there is a number of concerning statistics that show that those from white underprivileged backgrounds are doing academically worse than many pupils from other backgrounds who also have to live with socioeconomic disadvantage. That was quite clear in the stats. That is the reason why we have had this inquiry, so there is an issue that is specific.

The advantage of this inquiry is that we have had about eight or nine different evidence sessions and we have had a number of experts come forward who have a high level of knowledge in this area, who have said that there are specific cultural reasons why this is the case, so I do think that this should be looked into. That is not to say that we should not look at all disadvantaged groups, not at all, not for one minute, but what it does say is that we should be prepared to look at disadvantaged white pupils.

Q367 David Johnston: Nick, my question was on a topic we were discussing before, which is what we will do differently when we come out of covid. I wondered whether you thought there was a case to put a greater emphasis on destinations data. We know that some things are going to happen to attainment as a result of what we have been through. We know that we are coming into a difficult higher education and job and apprenticeship market. I wondered whether now might be the time to put a greater focus on the destinations data of schools that we already publish but, to my mind, we do not use enough.

Q368 Jonathan Gullis: If this is just about poverty of income, why are white left-behind children on free school meals doing so much worse than non-white children on free school meals? All the evidence, as Tom said, shows that white kids on free school meals are simply not keeping pace with their counterparts who are also on free school meals, despite attending the same schools and having the same teachers. For me, the way that both Ministers are not addressing specifically white working class pupils feels like this is part of the problem, that it is a taboo subject.

Chair: Thank you. I will get Nick to comment and then Vicky, please.

Nick Gibb: It is not a taboo subject, and I acknowledge the data that show those differences. My issue is that the solution is the same for whatever background the children come from. We know that when those solutions that I have been talking about are applied, the attainment gaps close, regardless of the background of the pupil and the colour of their skin. Going back to the Teach First response, it says that among every ethnic group except Chinese, children eligible for free school meals are less likely to pass English and maths than white children who are not eligible for free school meals. It is in every ethnic group where they are performing less well than those children who are not eligible for free school meals.



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It is important to look at the answers to these problems. There is no silver bullet. The answer is hard work to make sure that we are teaching children to read properly. That is why we rolled out the phonics policy from 2012. It is not perfect yet because there is a gap between disadvantaged children reaching the expected standard, 71%, and the whole population of 82%. There is no cultural reason why those figures should not be identical. Being able to decode phonically does not depend on whether you go to the theatre or your parents read lots of books. It matters whether you are taught it properly. There is a lot more to do in making sure primary schools are teaching reading as the evidence says they should be. That is why we have the English Hubs programme rolling out best practice in thousands of primary schools across the country.

The same applies to maths and to making sure they have a proper academic curriculum. The same applies to behaviour. We have Tom Bennett, who is our expert adviser on behaviour. We want to improve behaviour in our schools because that is how you get the focus and that is how you close the attainment gap.

We are not avoiding the question. I am quite happy to discuss the question. The issue is that the answer is the same to every ethnic group. It is about tackling low expectations, which is driven by poverty.

On David Johnston's point about destination data, you are absolutely right. We brought in an enhanced destination data in the performance tables because we think that it is crucial. There is no exam data in 2020, nor are we going to have performance tables for 2021. We are going to be publishing and enhancing the destination data as a way for parents to judge the quality of a school while we do not have external exams being sat.

Chair: Vicky, did you want to comment at all?

Vicky Ford: I am not avoiding the question at all because I have given you the data for the performance of white children on free school meals in their five year-old check when they start school. The most important thing we can do is not only invest during their whole educational career but make sure that by the time they start school children have the communication skills, social skills and language skills that set them up for life. That is why we have invested in the early years experience, specifically in children from lower incomes, and as a result, as I have just said, the proportion of those children who are achieving that good state of readiness has gone up from one in three to one in two. It still has further to go, but that is a great achievement because if you do not get it right at the beginning of your education journey, it is much more difficult to catch up later.

We have also invested specifically in children in need, of whom 71% are white. That is why we have focused during this lockdown and the pandemic on making sure that schools remain open for those children in need, our most vulnerable children, to absolutely focus on those who are



most at risk of falling behind, who, as you said, are those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, and a proportion of whom are white.

Chair: I am going to bring in David Simmonds. The only thing I would say to you, just before I do that, is that 53% of free school meal-eligible white British pupils, aged four to five, met the expected standard of development against an average for all FSM-eligible pupils of 55%. That is the lowest percentage for a free school meal ethnic group other than Irish Traveller, Gypsy/Roma and white Irish. I just wanted to bring that out. I could quote for the next 20 minutes every single stage of the education system where white working class boys and girls fall behind.

Q369 **David Simmonds:** I very much agree with what Nick said about challenging cultural low expectations and I very much support what Vicky was saying about investment in the early years. I think that there is a challenge in that the strategy sounds good, but what is actually happening feels like it is different. We know that children on free school meals, according to the Department's figures, are three times more likely to be excluded from school than children who are not on free school meals. We know from the Education Policy Institute research, which was published in 2019, that free schools are not opening in disadvantaged white communities and that where free schools are in proximity to disadvantaged white communities in particular, children from those communities are less represented in the school than those from the wider community. Free schools have mainly been opened in areas—Newham is a good example—that were already doing academically very well in 2010. They have surfed a wave of high performance that was happening, which is great. However, it does not suggest that they are a solution in policy terms.

The Children's Commissioner published some research into exclusions from mainstream schools that highlighted the prevalence, and it is quite distressing reading. Members of the Committee will be familiar with it. Children excluded are twice as likely to be in the care of the state, four times more likely to have grown up in poverty, seven times more likely to have a special educational need and 10 times more likely to suffer recognised mental health problems.

Picking up on Nick's point, it seems to me that we have extended the fatalistic culture of low expectations. It is in the interest of an institution to make an early decision: is this child going to flatter my statistics? If not, get them out the door either through behaviour policy, uniform policy or through the way in which the schools manage admissions. What we are seeing is a situation where the white working class children we are focused on are finding it harder to access the quality that we are aiming for than was the case before rather than easier.

This is where I would like to challenge Nick. What is the Department going to do to ensure that free schools get into the white disadvantaged communities and that those children are more represented in those schools and getting those opportunities? What are we going to do to



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make sure in the early years that the investment that has rightly been put in is sustained so that those children who start school ready stay in those schools and go on to get the brilliant GCSEs and the degrees that they are perfectly capable of? How are we going to ensure, for example, that primary free schools are admitting a much higher proportion of children on free school meals? At the moment, they notably lag behind mainstream primary schools in that respect.

Nick Gibb: Free schools have been skewed towards areas of disadvantage. That has been our ambition. They are not exclusively in those areas but they have been disproportionately established in more disadvantaged areas. They are doing extremely well in those areas. Some of the top 10 schools in Progress 8 are free schools.

You talked about expulsions. Don't forget the rate of expulsions is about 0.1% of pupils and it is actually lower now than it was 10 years ago. We should not focus too much on expulsions or suspensions, which are slightly higher than they were but still at 5.36%. You need to give head teachers the autonomy and the flexibility to be able to maintain discipline in the schools. The best way of closing the attainment gap, the best way of ensuring that white disadvantaged pupils and all disadvantaged pupils perform well is to have an ordered, disciplined environment, where they are free to learn and where hard work and study is the ethos of the school. That is how you close the attainment gap. We do not want to curtail the head teachers' flexibility in expelling pupils who are causing chaos in the school.

The most important thing for pupils is to be in school. The pupils who are out of school are not necessarily out of school because they have been expelled, it is because they do not show up. It is because they are playing truant, and we have to make sure that we have policies within schools to ensure we are addressing poor attendance rates. Attendance rates are absolutely key, and that is what we should be focusing on; less so on expulsions because, as I said, they are lower now than they were 10 years ago.

I just want to cite one other thing, Robert, on the evidence.

Chair: Yes, concisely if you can.

Nick Gibb: I will. In the PIRLS 2016 international study of reading we have gone from joint 10th to joint eighth in the world. What it says is that this improvement, "is largely attributable to increases in the average performance of boys and lower-performing pupils.". That is what you see. When you take this approach, rigorous curriculum, proper teaching, evidence based, proper discipline, you address disadvantage and you close the attainment gap. That will include disadvantaged white children as well as disadvantaged children from other groups, because they are the majority of our disadvantaged children. That is how you address disadvantaged white children, even though you are quite right, Robert, and I could also cite many figures that show that white free school meals



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children perform worse than free school meal children from many other ethnic minorities.

Vicky Ford: Can I come in with three specific points to answer David's question, especially about what the Department is doing about this. I have spoken about the importance of the two-year-old's early years experience. That 15 hours of free childcare has benefited a million children since we brought it in. The take-up is currently around 69% and we have a specialist contractor working in the 20 areas where we have lowest take-up to encourage greater take-up. We are also working, for example, with Jobcentres at the moment to make sure that parents are aware of their rights to those entitlements to push that up. The most important thing we can do for those young people is get that early years experience.

I have to question the comment you just made, David, about looked-after children, children in care, having the worst rates of exclusions. That is no longer true. Since we brought in the virtual school heads, our looked-after children have had both dramatic improvements in attendance and reductions in exclusions. They are now less likely to be permanently excluded from school than all other children and that is because of the introduction of the virtual school head.

David Simmonds: I totally agree on attendance, I was just citing the Children's Commissioner report of 2019 in respect of exclusions.

Vicky Ford: That would have been historic data rather than the cohort of kids that we have coming through school now, who have benefited from the virtual school heads. We knew it was an issue, but we have addressed it with the virtual school heads. It has been outstanding.

What are we doing in white working class areas to reduce exclusions? I will point you to some amazing work that has happened in some of our opportunity areas. In North Yorkshire the programme they have done on AP has found an 82% reduction in exclusions in Scarborough and a 15% reduction in fixed-term exclusions. In Hastings, we have been working on a six-week course re-engaging children, reducing the risk of exclusion. The data from that is that 28 of the 40 participants were re-engaged back into the classroom. These opportunity area projects have had phenomenal results and what we need to do next is roll out those models more widely across the country.

Q370 Dr Caroline Johnson: I have a couple of questions mostly for Nick, I think. The first is a rural question. As a rural MP, I am aware that often things are done by geography and that because of the nature of rural areas often the very rich are living very much beside the very poor, which is less of the case in some of our towns. How do you identify children who are disadvantaged in rural areas and ensure that they can achieve their full potential?

One of my other questions was about curriculum. My daughter is doing



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her GCSE options over the next few weeks. It has prompted me to look at quite a few different schools and the subjects that are on offer, and they vary quite considerably. I notice that the schools that seem to have the better results and a higher number of university entrants seem to offer more academic subjects than others. Comparing, for example, the school that I went to—you can compare schools over time in an area where the demographic abilities of the children locally are not really any different to what they were—the offering can be quite different over time. What are you doing to make sure that the curriculum is fully stretching those of higher academic ability in these areas of disadvantage?

The other question I had was: what targets do the Government have in place for universities to increase the percentage of students going to universities from black and minority ethnic groups and what assessment has the Department made of the effects that those targets may have on the white working class communities that we are looking at in our other inquiry?

Nick Gibb: You are right that the low expectations are not confined just to inner cities. It can be rural areas and the coastal areas of Britain as well. That is what we are focusing on and that is what the EBacc is about. You are right in your discussion about the curriculum. We need to have a stretching curriculum for the most able but also for less able children, and also able or less able children from disadvantaged backgrounds. It keeps the opportunities open the widest.

The Sutton Trust did an analysis of the EBacc combination in 2016 and it showed that for those schools that had increased their EBacc significantly at entry levels the children were more likely to achieve good GCSEs in English and maths. They were one percentage point more likely to be taking A-levels or other level 3 qualifications after the age of 16 and they were 1.8 percentage points less likely to have dropped out of education entirely. It also said that pupil premium students benefited most from that change in curriculum from a low EBacc entry to a high EBacc entry. This is why I feel so very strongly that all children should be taking that combination of academic subjects right up to 16. Beyond 16, of course, young people will want to specialise in what they want to do in the long run.

On higher education, we have record numbers of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds going to our universities, but we also need to make sure that disadvantaged young people from all backgrounds are well represented in the most selective of those universities. That is about making sure they make the right choices post-16 in the subjects that they choose. They are more likely to be able to choose those right subjects if they have not closed options before the age of 16. That is why, again, it is so important to have taken the core academic subjects: maths, English, at least two sciences. We have seen a huge increase in the proportion of young people taking at least two science GCSEs, from about 60% to over 90% now taking that combination.



Q371 Dr Caroline Johnson: The last question is about what university targets are put in place to increase the percentage of pupils from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and what assessment your Department has made of the effect on the white working class disadvantaged students, who we hear are the least likely to enter university.

Nick Gibb: I am not sure that we have targets. We just want to make sure that we increase the proportion from all backgrounds going to our universities. As I said, there are record numbers going to our universities from disadvantaged backgrounds. My understanding—I do not have the figures in front of me—is that we also have record numbers going from BAME backgrounds into our higher education sector. I would need to double check that figure.

Q372 Chair: We also have the least white working class boys and girls on free school meals going to universities, and they do not tend to go to Russell Group universities. When they do, they tend to drop out much more than others.

Nick Gibb: Yes, and I have tried throughout this session to say that that is what we have been addressing since 2010. All our reforms—and they are not uncontroversial; our reforms have met with quite fierce resistance from many in the education world—are resulting in better achievement from all children from disadvantaged backgrounds, of whom the majority are white.

Chair: I get the message. I am not against what you have done at all. I think that a lot of it has been very good. I just think that there is a misunderstanding of what our inquiry is about.

Vicky Ford: Can I come in on the rural areas, possibly, Chair?

Chair: I will let you do that in the next session if that is okay because we are behind time and I am conscious of the Minister's time.

Q373 Ian Mearns: We have heard that free school meal eligibility is an incomplete measure of educational disadvantage. How could the Department collaborate with other Departments to better inform interventions and analysis of how disadvantage affects educational attainment? Would you consider expanding the range of data that you publish and make available for researchers? Would you look at international comparisons, for example, for broadening access to the National Pupil Database to allow us to link up performance, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and geographical location? Is parental educational attainment a significant issue rather than the broad brush of free school meal eligibility? Are these questions being looked at by the Department?

Lastly, Minister, on free school meals, am I right in thinking that for the numbers of youngsters who are entitled to free school meals to drive pupil premium, the Department has decided to use autumn data as opposed to spring term data and, therefore, potentially not allow additional youngsters on to pupil premium in the next financial year?



Chair: Vicky, do you want to answer that bit first?

Vicky Ford: First of all, we have looked at studies such as whether parental attainment has that correlation with the child's attainment. There have been many studies as to what is the best marker, and the best marker from those studies is looking at incomes, which is why we use the free school meals marker to drive the pupil premium. The pupil premium has made a massive change over the past decade. It has put more than £18 billion into schools. We do not do it on a regional basis with the pupil premium, we do it at school level to get into which schools have the highest levels of those children. That is why we invest through the free school meals marker.

Ian, on your question about how many children are on free school meals and what is going to happen next year, we do the January census. We have just done the January census of how many children are on free school meals and we need that data to number crunch and be able to publish that, which we will be doing shortly.

Chair: I am going to bring in Apsana Begum now. If other colleagues have questions I will try to bring them in at the end because we are behind time.

Q374 **Apsana Begum:** Ministers, you have said quite a lot in this session about poverty and family income. I want to ask a little bit more about the influence of family and the home environment. What is the Department's understanding of the role of family instability and the home environment in the attainment gap in particular between disadvantaged white pupils and their peers?

Nick Gibb: Of course, the home environment has a huge impact, and it is the role of education to overcome that. One of the figures that really worried me when we were in Opposition was the notion of academic resilience. This is the degree to which a young person can excel, regardless of their socioeconomic background. The 2009 PISA study said that we had a fall in the percentage of students from a disadvantaged background classed as academically resilient, that is the capacity of individuals to prosper despite encountering adverse circumstances. We have sought to address that.

Of course, children will have been brought up in a whole raft of different home environments, but we want to make sure that the school environment is designed to overcome those disadvantages. We have a number of programmes as well like Hungry Little Minds, which is designed to encourage families to read to their children and to talk to their children so they can improve their vocabulary. Vocabulary development is absolutely key to educational potential and, again, it is what we have been trying to do with all our reforms, in the early years but also beyond the early years into school. E D Hirsch, in his book "The Schools We Need And Why We Don't Have Them", says there is this concept of the "Matthew Effect" within language acquisition. He says that



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this is the cumulative advantage that pupils with large vocabularies experience once they start school: because they know more, they learn more, and the gap between them and their less-advantaged peers grows ever wider. That is why we have been focusing so much on language development through programmes like Hungry Little Minds, but also the reforms to the early years foundation stage as well. As Vicky will no doubt talk about, the Nuffield early language intervention programme—

Chair: Nick, I need you to be much more concise if that is okay.

Nick Gibb: Sorry.

Q375 **Apsana Begum:** What are the specific things that you are looking at on instability? In the inquiry we have looked at single-parent households. We have explored whether there is, in comparison, say, to ethnic minority communities, this idea that white communities or white disadvantaged communities are not necessarily aware of their own disadvantages. Is that something that the Department has explored? Is work being done to measure the ways in which family structures affect parent and child trajectories and outcomes? That is a specific question. We really want to know what kind of evidence base is being built to capture this in changing family structures and so forth in these communities.

Nick Gibb: Do you want to come in on that, Vicky, or I can cite the 2018 research?

Vicky Ford: Apsana, it is a really good question. What we know from the children in need study, which was a massive piece of work undertaken by the Government, is that children who have needed a social worker do significantly worse than others at every stage of education. It is that sign marker that the family has needed a social worker and that sort of support.

On the good news, there were about 3% fewer children in need last March compared to the year before, but it is about 389,000 children. One of the things that we are doing through the care review, which we have just launched, is making sure that the review looks at all children in need, not just those who are looked-after children at the moment. We are investing hugely in our children and young people's services; a total of £10.5 billion is being invested in children and young people's services, which has been a 7% increase. We are looking through, for example, our Family Hubs project at whether or not that model of bringing together different services, which is often being used by local authorities now, can make that difference, getting that early help and early intervention to families in need and supporting them before—

Q376 **Apsana Begum:** Sorry to interject, Minister. In a nutshell, if possible, what specifically did that review find about white working class communities? That is what we are looking at here, not—



Vicky Ford: It found, looking at the ethnicity of children in need, that 72% of them are white, so it is a very significant proportion when you look at them by definition. The big marker was that the children in the families that have needed a social worker are at risk of falling behind. As I said, we have put in place that virtual school head project, which has really helped those children and young people in care or who have been care leavers and made dramatic differences to their outcomes as well. Through the care review we will be looking again at what more we could be doing for this wider cohort of the children who have needed a social worker. That is again why we have kept schools open for them.

Q377 **Apsana Begum:** I have a final question. Are you concerned or are you thinking about how the social care aspect or element relates to white working class communities and their experiences of education? Is that what you are saying, looking at the broader picture of social care?

Vicky Ford: What I am saying is that the more we can do to support a family early on so that they do not face the struggles that sometimes lead to them having a social worker, the more we can support the child so that they do not go through that more traumatic experience and, therefore, are better set up to learn.

Another important part of the work that we are doing is the Leadsom review of the first 1,000 days, from conception through the child's life, to make sure that we put the support in very early on so that you do not end up with increasing need further on, which can impact on the child's education.

Nick Gibb: Can I come in on this as well? A very good survey was done in 2018, "Understanding Key Stage 4 Attainment and Progress: Evidence from LSYPE2", a research report from Carli Lessof and others. Basically, it makes the correlation that disadvantage is associated with lower attainment, but it then goes on to say specifically that, "Truanting for several days at a time ... corresponded to markedly lower attainment". It says, "Young people who usually did all of their homework had higher attainment than those who usually did most of their homework and, particularly, those who usually only did some or none of it". We take that kind of research, and that is why we place such priority on attendance and why we changed the definition of persistent absence from 15% down to 10%. It is why the schools that focus on making sure children complete their homework—and schools like Michaela will do that—is how you address these issues.

Chair: Okay. At the end I will comment on some of the things that you have said, but I am going to bring in Kim Johnson for her questions.

Q378 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Ministers. Both of you have mentioned that poverty is a central factor to disadvantage. Nick, you mentioned that you have done everything to tackle it since 2010, yet child poverty has increased due to austerity measures, particularly in cities like mine where we have lost £450 million in our funding. How would you explain this on



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education attainment for the most disadvantaged? Can you also say what conversations you have been having with other Departments, particularly with the DWP about increasing benefits or with MHCLG about more money for local authorities, to provide adequate funding to our public sector?

Nick Gibb: That goes beyond the brief of schools. My objective is that, whatever the level of poverty is in society, there should not be a poverty of expectations. The way you break the cycle of poverty is to make sure that young people, whatever their backgrounds, leave school well educated and able to fulfil their potential, whether that is going to university or going into an apprenticeship or going into a job with training. Whatever it is, they need to be cognitively and intellectually developed to the best of their abilities, certainly by the age of 16. That has been our objective from 2010. I can keep citing the key stage 2 results, the key stage 4 results, EBacc results, the phonics results, all of which point to success in closing that attainment gap.

What we need to do to address the very issue that this Committee is concerned about is to double down on our education reform programme that we have implemented since 2010 and to make sure that there are not areas—I cited those EBacc entry figures of 22% in some parts of the country, but I can show you schools that have even lower EBacc entry than the 21.4% in Blackpool. If we want to address unequal opportunities in our school system, we need to challenge schools with low EBacc entries. They need to be giving all young children a proper curriculum, proper behaviour policies and so on. That is how you address that cycle of poverty.

Q379 **Kim Johnson:** I take on board what you are saying, Nick, about all of the datasets that you have mentioned. I believe—and you have already considered it—poverty is a determining factor in the widening of the education attainment gap. The fact that poverty has increased since 2010 is also a major issue for a lot of our schools at the moment in how children succeed. How can they do that on empty bellies? This is the question that a lot of people are asking.

Nick Gibb: Vicky might want to come in on the food issue, but it is the response to poverty that is our challenge, making sure that is not a determinant, that it does not change expectations. We have also changed the national funding formula. When we introduced it we wanted to make sure that more money went to areas of deprivation. That is why 17% of the national funding formula approach is additional needs. Things like free school meals—

Chair: Okay, Vicky, do you want to come in on that?

Vicky Ford: Over the past decade, the Government have done a huge amount to address those on lower incomes: increasing the living wage, reducing the tax burden for those on lower incomes and also during the pandemic putting in a huge amount more financial support. I speak



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regularly to my contacts at the DWP and other Ministers. The work that we have done on the UC lift-up, the local housing allowance lift-ups and the furlough scheme to keep jobs have been very important to this.

On children having access to food, please don't frighten children. We have put a massive project in through the Covid Winter Grant Scheme of £170 million so that any family that is struggling, not just children of school age but any family that is struggling, has access to food support, fuel support, so that they are warm as well, over this difficult winter. That is all available through your local authorities, it is supported—

Chair: Okay, got it.

Q380 **Kim Johnson:** You are doing all that and yet poverty is increasing. We are seeing more people in poverty and suffering, and that impacts on education attainment.

Vicky Ford: As I said earlier, the attainment of young children over the past 10 years has improved dramatically. That statistic that children on free school meals who are at a good level by the time it gets to their five year-old check has gone up from 36% to 57%. That is massive. We have put that support in for those children so that their education from the very beginning is dramatically improved from where it was a decade ago.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to bring in Tom briefly. Be as brief as you can because we are running behind. How much more time do you have, Nick?

Nick Gibb: I have got nothing, I have kept a window beyond this time so you can ask as many questions as you want.

Chair: It is very good of you to let it overrun.

Q381 **Tom Hunt:** This is to do with the significant barriers that all young children face, regardless of their background and the colour of their skin, and the issue about poverty that Kim has mentioned. Do we believe that white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are privileged in any way? Do we think it is appropriate that one of the largest children's charities in the country, that primarily works with white children from disadvantaged backgrounds, is sending a guide to parents of those children explaining white privilege?

Vicky Ford: That is my £1 fine to the NSPCC for failing to be off the mute button. They are making a lot of money out of me during this lockdown. I recommend you all do the same.

No, Tom, the important thing is to make sure that we are working to support those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and all backgrounds, and making sure that we learn from what we have done in the past few years. We have learned the lessons from the opportunity areas, which have some fantastic lessons that we can share more widely across the country. We need to make sure that we are supporting all children. I do not think, as Nick has said many times, that you should be saying to a



child, "It is because of the colour of your skin that you react this way". I don't think that is the right way of putting the support in for them, but maybe Nick would like to say more on this.

Q382 Tom Hunt: There is a very specific point here, which is that a number of witnesses have said that lots of white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are not aware of their own disadvantage and that is not explained. That is not going to be helped if they are told they are privileged by the largest children's charity in the country.

Nick Gibb: The key to all this is developing young people's intellectual capability. That is what it is all about and that is what schools have to focus on, making sure that they are reading enough and they are taught a broad and academically challenging curriculum. Let me quote from E D Hirsch again. He says, "A child's initial lack of intellectual capital is not an immutable given that our schools are powerless to change. Rather, it is a challenge that schools can meet by overcoming their academic incoherence. Throughout the world, just one way has been devised to meet the double challenge of educational excellence and fairness: to teach definite skills and a solid core of content." The evidence from around the world says that is how you address all the challenges that you are facing.

Chair: We have got it. I do not think the Committee is arguing with you on this point. I will come on to it at the end.

Q383 Ian Mearns: A question about how could programmes such as opportunity areas play a more significant role in tackling regional inequalities. We have a dozen opportunities areas, none at all in the north-east of England of course, although we have an opportunity fund, which is not the same thing. There are 152 local authority areas that have children's services and schools within them. The opportunity areas are just scratching the surface from this perspective. If we are intending to roll out the lessons from opportunity areas, which would inherently bring some costs with it, will the resource follow to roll out those lessons and good practices?

Nick Gibb: The opportunity areas were designed to test different approaches to social mobility, and we have learnt a huge amount from those opportunity areas so far. We will take those lessons going forward. Vicky will talk about glasses for classes and other great programmes that have proven to work. That is the purpose of those opportunity areas. Of course, it is not in all 150 local authorities, it is in just a dozen or so that we have prioritised. It is a learning exercise, and we have learnt a huge amount. I will hand over to Vicky.

Chair: Vicky, just briefly, save yourself for your session.

Vicky Ford: I will talk to the opportunity areas because it is my brief. They are each twinned with another local authority and so they are rolling out what their learning is into other local authorities. Some of the things that we have learnt—Nick mentioned the glasses for classes, which was a



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project in Bradford, a phenomenal link-up between health and education. We found that 2,500 children had failed their eye test but had not been provided with a pair of glasses. By introducing that through education we have got the glasses to the kids and they are ready to learn. That is the sort of project we want to take more widely.

Another fantastic project has been looking at whether or not this five year-old check, that I have mentioned a few times, sets up early markers for autism. It is very successful and is allowing us to identify kids with autism much earlier and get support for them. Some of these will be cost saving in the long term, will reduce exclusions. They will be cost saving if we get those children ready to—

Q384 Chair: It is interesting that the Department's written submission highlights examples of schools that have success in raising outcomes for disadvantaged children, but these are examples of schools generally in areas with higher than the national average levels of ethnic diversity. Could you let us know any stand-out examples of schools that have successfully raised outcomes of disadvantaged pupils in predominantly white communities?

Vicky Ford: You might want to look at the St Leonards Academy project in Hastings, where they have been piloting this use of in-house alternative provisions. We are in the middle of our reforms of AP that will feed into the SEND review. That would be a good project that we have seen in one of those schools.

Chair: Hopefully we can go and visit when restrictions allow.

Q385 Christian Wakeford: The first question is to Vicky. You touched on the first 1,000 days project, which has been worked on by Andrea Leadsom. In a year of missed health visits and catch-ups with health workers, the potential for missing out on catch-up or advising on 15 hours and so on, what can Public Health England and the Department working together do to make sure that no child has missed out or that we can catch up as quickly as possible with those missed appointments?

Vicky Ford: In the first lockdown there was a lot of concern that health visitors had been redeployed from the front line. Mums and parents of new babies have had a very challenging time. We have worked with the chief nurse to make it very clear to CCGs across the country that health visitors should not be redeployed in this second lockdown, they should continue their visits during the winter. They are so important for those really early checks. Especially for, sadly, identifying children at risk of harm, having those eyes on them is very important.

We have also encouraged directors of children's services across the country to go and double check with families that may have been in challenge before, particularly those who have been on child protection plans in the past. If they have had a new baby at this time, go and double check how the family has been managing. That has been very important work that social workers across the country have been doing.



We have also worked to keep mother and baby groups open as much as possible. There are still some that are open even in this lockdown, not the toddler music group but the ones that are there to support the mum with her wellbeing, to try to minimise that risk.

Christian, this is one of the reasons why we have kept early years open because it was so important for the child's development. Those are the most important years of a child's education; you cannot get those months back.

Q386 Christian Wakeford: You mentioned earlier in the meeting that roughly 68% are taking advantage of the 15 free hours. Obviously, if they are not aware of free hours because they have not had their health visit—I am using my own example. We missed out a two-year health check with my daughter. We are quite fortunate, but for those who have missed out, have not had a catch-up, have not had a phone call, what is being done to target those who potentially are most in need?

Vicky Ford: We are working with Hempsall's, which is a private contractor that we did a procurement for. It has been working with the 20 authorities where we have the lowest take-up to get that knowledge out through health visitors and others to identify parents of eligible two year-olds and encourage them to take it up.

Q387 Christian Wakeford: The Department has acknowledged the importance of high-quality early years support across all groups. How can the Department use funding such as the early years premium to ensure that disadvantaged white pupils are able to access their full entitlement?

Vicky Ford: The early years premium is there, but also we have been raising the standards of early years education throughout, reforming the early years foundation stage. Another project that has been very important is the ELI project, which is looking at early language markers to be able to identify those children who are falling behind in their language. We trained 4,000 health visitors across the country in this new early language identification measure and then putting in the bespoke support for the early years provider, the parents and the health visitor to get the child's language back on track. We have been working on that project over the past year and continue to work on it.

Q388 Christian Wakeford: A final question from me. You recently announced the National Centre for Family Hubs and Integrated Family Services. How will you ensure that the initiative serves to reduce the gap between the disadvantaged white pupils and their peers that emerges from the very earliest point of a child's life?

Vicky Ford: We are doing two things. We are introducing the Centre for Family Hubs, which will help to share best practice between local authorities where they use these integrated service models. We are also doing a big piece of research on what works best within those integrated services, because it is about getting early support out to families that need it. That is what the family hub model does by bringing together



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different public sector services—you mentioned health visitors—but also sometimes it is signposting to other voluntary sector bodies. We know the children who often are most in need sadly come from families where there has been domestic abuse or relationships where there has been domestic abuse, so often it is signposting support in that area, and teaching families to support each other. It is a very important piece of research as well as being able to share the best practice.

Q389 Dr Caroline Johnson: Minister, I want to go back to what you said about the English Baccalaureate, which is the maths, two sciences, geography, history and a language. I have heard that about 40% of GCSE students sit that at the moment. Do you have any particular targets set to increase that? I share your desire to improve the academic aspirations. Do you set targets for schools individually or within geographical areas to improve their percentage? How do you support those for modern languages? We know that some students are put off sitting modern languages because they believe that native speakers will have a significant advantage and dominate the higher grades and they want the best grades for themselves to get to university. I would be grateful to know how you are going to achieve that.

Nick Gibb: We have a target of 75% nationally being entered for the EBacc combination by 2022 and then the exams in 2024, and 90% by 2025, with exams in 2027. It is an ambitious target, but we believe that it is absolutely key to social mobility.

Regarding modern foreign languages, it is always a challenge for teacher recruitment when you have a strong economy, as we have had up until the pandemic, and I am sure we will have when we come out of the pandemic. A couple of years ago we asked Ian Bauckham, a head teacher and formerly a language teacher, to look at how languages are taught. They are not always taught in the most effective way in schools. His review sets out a better way of teaching languages that children can cope with better. We are rolling that out through our modern foreign language hubs as well to spread that best practice.

Q390 Dr Caroline Johnson: What about the difficulty posed by the fact that some people are native speakers and that puts off other people?

Nick Gibb: Yes, at A-levels. I understand that, and we have asked Ofqual to look at that. We have made changes so far and will be making more changes to make sure that the grading of GCSE and A-levels is not seen as or is harsher than the grading in other subjects. It is hugely important that more young people take a foreign language in the global economy that we are in, particularly post-Brexit. We have to be able to at least attempt to speak the language of our suppliers and our customers.

Q391 Fleur Anderson: We have heard evidence from local community groups and others about the importance of careers advice in schools and also youth services working alongside schools and children. We were talking earlier about destinations where young people would go and aspirations



as well; that close mentoring and work with young people thinking about their future, with careers advice in school and youth services. What is your assessment and your analysis of both of those and their contribution to what we are talking about in the inquiry? Are they a nice-to-have or are they essential?

Nick Gibb: Careers advice is, of course, hugely important. It is important for making the right choices post 16 so you choose the right A-levels if you want to be a lawyer or you choose the right GCSEs if you want to move on to a technical education. You have done the sciences, you are proficient in maths and so on. It is important and it is also an issue of aspiration. We want to do more to encourage visits to schools of people who excel in their own field so that young people can see the wide array of career opportunities there is. That is something that we are promoting. We have established the Careers Enterprise Company to help improve the quality of careers advice in our schools, which is also an important initiative.

Q392 **Fleur Anderson:** In my child's school there used to be someone who knew everyone and would give that advice and now it is coming from outside. It seems to be totally disconnected. Is there a problem there?

Nick Gibb: The quality of everything is variable. We understand the importance of good-quality careers advice. Teachers are not always the best people. They will understand their pupils, but they do not necessarily know—unless they are a specialist in this field—what opportunities are available in a modern economy. That is why external advice is very useful. I also think it is very important that young people get to meet and hear and speak to people who excel in a whole range of industries, professions and trades. Vicky, do you want to come in?

Vicky Ford: Yes. You should also be looking at the other things we have done for young people to get them into different opportunities, such as introducing the T-levels, apprenticeships, the Kickstart programme. One programme that I am particularly proud of and we have run in the pandemic has been a bespoke programme for children leaving alternative provision—those year 11s leaving AP—who are most likely to drop out of further education. We put in an extra £7 million to give those children specific support for this academic year, and that has helped them to stay engaged in education and training going forward. You need to look at in the round a massive change in helping young people on different pathways to find a job.

Q393 **Fleur Anderson:** Do you have evidence about the role of youth services in enabling young people to access those?

Vicky Ford: There were some interesting projects that were part of our HAF, holiday activity and food projects, especially in Newcastle, if I am right. They ran projects with teenagers over the summer, street games, projects, keeping them engaged in education. That engagement with youth services will be part of the HAF programme as well.



Q394 Ian Mearns: The importance of independent, impartial careers information, advice and guidance is vital. We have seen evidence in other inquiries that the Baker clause has not been fully implemented by schools so that impartiality, independence and access to advice and guidance is not always universally available. I would like to know what Ministers are going to do to tackle that.

There are differences in the rates of progress between different groups of people to attract pupil premium funding. How can this key funding in support of disadvantaged pupils be better targeted to boost the attainment of groups that are currently struggling, including those from disadvantaged white backgrounds? How do you intend to attract a more diverse workforce to teach in the most challenging schools with particular regard to gender and socioeconomic background?

Nick Gibb: I agree with everything you say. Careers advice in our schools does need to be high quality and independent.

Regarding the pupil premium—and as Vicky said this is a huge sum of money—every year £2.4 billion, £18 billion since the programme started, has been allocated to schools on the basis of the numbers of children eligible for free school meals.

We ask schools to look at the Education Endowment Foundation evidence—that was established with a foundation of £137 million—to research the best approaches to helping close the attainment gap in our school system. We ask schools to look at the evidence that promising programmes the EEF has evaluated are the most effective way of closing that attainment gap. We say to schools that up to half of the pupil premium can be spent on general improvement—employ another maths teacher to improve everybody's education, including disadvantaged children. We prefer the other 50% to be targeted through the EEF promising programmes. Schools are held to account in how they spend their pupil premium money.

Q395 Ian Mearns: On the pupil premium, though, Nick, Vicky was saying earlier about the January data driving the numbers. As I understand it, that January data will not be number crunched and published until June and, therefore, from that perspective what will be the numbers—maybe you could write to us about the detail of this—and where will they come from? Where will they be generated from that will drive the pupil premium funding in the next financial year, in 2021-22?

Nick Gibb: It will be based on the October census, which is in line with the census that the national funding formula is based on. This is designed to give schools greater clarity about what the pupil premium funding will be. Do not forget, of course, that pupil premium funding is based on two factors. It is based on FSM current, which funds the meal itself, and FSM 6, which is eligibility for free school meals at any point in the last six years of a child's school career. That means, as a proportion, any change



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in one year will be a small proportion of the Ever 6 figure. It is the right approach for certain—

Q396 **Ian Mearns:** In using the October data, will the Department be saving £250 million by comparison to the January data?

Nick Gibb: I am not aware of that, but what I am aware of is that, by using that data we will see a higher level of pupil premium going up to about £2.5 billion as a consequence. There is also the FSM supplementary grant, which helps schools fund the cost of free school meals when there is a large—

Chair: Ian, I am going to bring in Tom now.

Ian Mearns: Sorry, Nick, if you could clarify that about what the difference would be if you used the January data, but do it after the Committee if you wouldn't mind.

Chair: If you could just write to us that will be fine.

Q397 **Tom Hunt:** In some of the previous sessions we have had we touched on this issue of how some families and pupils from the community in which we are talking about may not necessarily see education in school as a platform for advancement and something to engage in. That is a cultural problem. It is absolutely admirable and good that the Government are focusing on wanting to increase the proportion of this group who go on to university, but for some university may not be the focus. They may prefer to go down the technical education route. The CfEY paper is a significant step forward from what I can see and there is a lot in it that is very positive.

Do you think, to an extent, that for some people in the past there has not always been good quality, independent careers advice from an early age that is signposting towards technical education and apprenticeships and so on and that may be a slight explainer for why there has not always been that level of engagement in the school system? Ultimately, if you are going to take a good quality technical education route, you still need to get good GCSEs and do well at the academic group before that point.

Nick Gibb: You make a valid point, and we will write to the Committee about the reforms that we have in train at the moment. There is a lot of discussion about improving the quality of careers advice in our schools and from an earlier age than has been the case in the past.

You are right also about expectations. Whatever field you go into in a modern economy, you need that grounding, particularly in maths and English, to be able to succeed, whatever the technical route. We have tried as a Government to create this parity of esteem between an academic route and a technical route. That is why we have a graduate apprenticeship scheme. Our colleague Gillian Keegan could extol the virtues of it, being a beneficiary of that scheme herself. We have improved the T-levels. Following the Sainsbury review, we have tried to



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clarify the routes for young people who want to take that technical route to a successful career.

Q398 Chair: I have a couple of questions to end with. You mentioned that you thought the cause of this was poverty. Presumably you mean income poverty or do you mean poverty of aspiration? What I do not understand is if there is a white working class person on free school meals living in a deprived neighbourhood and suffering significant income poverty, and there is a member of the ethnic community living in that same neighbourhood suffering a significant amount of income poverty, the statistics suggest in every way that the person from an ethnic background is going to perform better than the white working class. Both are suffering income poverty and yet one performs better than the other. How can you say it is just down to poverty that white working class boys and girls on free school meals underperform compared to most other ethnic groups?

Nick Gibb: Both of those children you are talking about will underperform compared to other children who are not eligible for free school meals.

Chair: Yes, and the white working class boys and girls will underperform the worst.

Nick Gibb: That is true. But the point is, if you want to address the issue, how do you resolve that issue? You do so by the measures that I have been talking about. It is about the reaction of schools, particularly in the past, to children from disadvantaged backgrounds and the low expectations that have been applied to those children. That is what we have been trying to change, and it is not easy to change; it is controversial. Everything we have done to address that has been controversial. I hear people saying that there needs to be a different curriculum for these young people, that there should be a more relevant curriculum up to the age of 16 for these young people. I say absolutely not. What is good for a wealthy child is good for a child from a poorer background.

Q399 Chair: You still have not answered the question, why—whatever the circumstances, their backgrounds—the person from the ethnic background is most likely to perform better. You are answering by making a case for the remedy. As I have always said, I think you have done incredible work on literacy and numeracy. What I am trying to understand is how can you just say it is down to poverty when we know there are different outcomes under the existing system for those of most ethnic groups?

Nick Gibb: There are many reasons why it will differ and why those figures differ for white disadvantaged children compared to other ethnic minorities. This is a very complex area, but what we do know is that white disadvantaged children make up the overwhelming majority of disadvantaged children and what we do know—



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Chair: We are looking at it comparatively.

Nick Gibb: You should do that, but what I am interested in is how do we address and improve the attainment of those disadvantaged young people. What we have found is that the measures that we have taken since 2010 work, but they are not easy to implement, and they are controversial. We need support in rolling out higher levels of EBacc uptake, making sure that all schools are teaching reading in the most effective way through phonics, that they are adopting the evidence-based approach to teaching maths, that they have a knowledge of the curriculum—

Chair: Okay, so what—

Nick Gibb: This is important, I do not want to skip through too quickly.

Chair: No, you have said it all the way through.

Nick Gibb: The behaviour policies as well are very important in our schools. We need your support in backing and doubling down on those approaches to education. That is how we address the very real issues that this Committee is focused on.

Q400 **Chair:** You have then given quite a cliched response saying it is down to poverty when we know—

Nick Gibb: No. It is the reaction to poverty that is the issue.

Q401 **Chair:** You quoted Hirsch and others and you said the reason why is poverty when we know that ethnic groups in the same poverty income levels do better. To give the university example from the OfS, the proportion of white British pupils who were FSM-eligible and started higher education by the age of 19 in 2018-19 was 16%, the lowest of any ethnic group other than Irish Traveller or Gypsy Roma. That is even with the reforms. Are you going to say that is just down to poverty?

Nick Gibb: If you look, for example, at the Ofsted evidence to the Committee it says, "The quality of education a pupil receives is at least as important a factor in their performance as their context or the schools' context". That is not to say that schools with a greater number of disadvantaged pupils do not face specific challenges or to say that those challenges are easy to overcome but it does show that it is possible to overcome them by focusing on the right things. It then goes on to say that disadvantaged pupils do well at schools that deliver a good, ambitious education, however a poor education will impact more upon a disadvantaged pupil. That is the issue. You can debate, and I am delighted you are taking evidence—

Q402 **Chair:** I am not debating with you. No, I am not debating with you, I am just asking you questions. Surely it is good to understand the cause and not just give a cliched response that it is down to poverty.

Nick Gibb: This is a solid piece of—



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Chair: You are the one who is being clichéd by just saying it is down to poverty when we know that—

Nick Gibb: That was one phrase among many that I have uttered today.

Q403 **Chair:** No, you articulated it very clearly by using Teach First. Surely even under your view about how things should be—I have a lot of sympathy with it—you would then say that, if we know that working-class pupils from disadvantaged areas are not going to university, and it is something you care about deeply, surely there should be some targeted interventions rather than just saying, “Okay, we just carry on as we have been before”. You would say when you look at the statistics that something is going on.

Nick Gibb: What would be—

Chair: Hang on, and you would therefore say, “Right, this is what we need to do to have a targeted intervention to make sure that more white working class boys and girls attend a university”, something that you care about.

Nick Gibb: Yes, and we do have targeted interventions. That is why the funding formula is skewed to disadvantage. That is why we have the pupil premium. It is also why we are addressing some of the fundamental issues that have led to that outcome, which is that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to go to schools that have lower expectations, particularly in the past. If you address the low expectations, if you spread best practice, if you look in reality at those schools that have managed to achieve the attainment gap being closed and you spread that best practice across the school system, if you improve teacher training to make sure that teachers starting in our schools are well versed in how to maintain good behaviour in our schools, that they use the best practice, that they are well versed in primary schools in teaching reading so we close the reading gap—if you look at what has been achieved in the last 10 years you can see that we are achieving that with the phonic results for free school meal children. I do not have the figures in front of me, but the phonic results rose from 44% in 2012 to 70% in 2019.

In every area, EBacc, key stage 2, phonics, the approach we are taking has been proven to work. What we have to do is double down on that to make sure that there are more schools—

Q404 **Chair:** Is it the case that pre-covid the attainment gap was stalling between disadvantaged peers and their better-off—

Nick Gibb: Yes, in that particular year.

Q405 **Chair:** Why has it stalled after all the work you have been doing?

Nick Gibb: It is certainly a lot higher than it was when we came into office. Of course, we have to keep making sure that we are spreading that best practice in reading, that we are making sure that the



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international approach to teaching maths is spread among our schools. It is not easy to do this, it really isn't.

What we are increasingly clear about is that we know what works in helping those children from disadvantaged backgrounds to get a better education closer to that of their peers. The free school programme has also helped us produce a bank of evidence about that approach to behaviour and curriculum that we know works. It is about doing more to spread that approach throughout the school system.

None of this is easy, it really is not. There is a huge amount still to do, but we have increasing amounts of evidence now about the most effective way to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds. You say that I am attributing it to poverty. Yes, but it is a reaction to poverty, the expectations too many schools in the past have had of children from disadvantaged backgrounds that we have addressed and we need to keep addressing in the future, and not to think that white working class children or white disadvantaged children somehow should have a different curriculum, more "relevant"—

Q406 **Chair:** Tell me where that has been said.

Nick Gibb: People argue that.

Q407 **Chair:** What I have been arguing for is to acknowledge there is a problem, to look at the reasons why this is happening rather than just saying that it is poverty.

Vicky Ford: Robert, may I come in? A young person applying for university is 18 years-old, 17 years-old and their educational journey will have started when they were two. If 15 years ago, 16 years ago they were being left to fall behind, that is what we have had to correct. The fact that we have corrected that over the past half dozen years and a good level of attainment compared to 2013 among our free school meals children has gone from 36% to 57%, our white children on free school meals has gone from one in three to one in two, sets those kids up for the educational journey that takes them through all those school reforms that Nick has been talking about, through phonics and the educational journey. That is why you are going to see better outcomes for the cohort that have been going through early years over the past decade than you saw in the decade before. It takes time.

We also need to target our efforts on those who are most falling behind. We have a very good project going at the moment for care leavers, who have the lowest levels of going to university. We are working with the universities to get more care leavers in.

Fleur, I am sorry, I did not come back in on your point about youth clubs enough. We have kept youth clubs open for those most vulnerable children throughout this. That project we are doing is fantastic.

Fleur Anderson: A thousand have closed in the last 10 years. A



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thousand have closed. You cannot say there is more or they are better.

Chair: Nick, you have stayed way beyond time. Fleur, sorry, did you want to come back?

Fleur Anderson: No, just to say 1,000 youth clubs have closed in the last 10 years. We can see there is an impact locally on all the things we are talking about, working with schools on aspirations, mentoring and working with families as well to build up that trust.

Chair: Nick, one last question from Tom Hunt. I know you stayed way beyond time and I do appreciate that.

Q408 Tom Hunt: It is about special educational needs. How has the third national lockdown affected children and young people with SEND and what steps has the Department taken to prevent the detrimental effects that we heard about from the first national lockdown, including the loss of therapy time, respite for families and their ability with local authority support for children with SEND?

There are a couple of points here. First, I know those with EHC plans are still able to come in. We had a session with some head teachers last week who said that they were slightly concerned that many were not coming in who perhaps ought to. It is very hard to tailor education with them not coming in. What are the dangers at a national level on that? Do you have any concerns?

Secondly, how have those who do not have those plans but still have learning needs—for example, those with dyslexia and dyspraxia and so on—coped with online learning? Do you have any concerns that they may be falling further behind as a result of the latest school closures?

Vicky Ford: Currently the attendance at schools of those with EHC plans is about 36%, so just over a third. I meet regularly with different special schools across the country and have been doing so during last term and this term to understand their issues. The attendance is much higher than it was in the first lockdown. We have encouraged the special schools especially, and schools, to work with the parents with co-decision here, so if the parent would like the child to be in school at this time the schools should respect that.

That is a bit different to the approach we took in the first lockdown when we did that “risk assess your child”. Now we know much more about the impact of the virus on different children in different conditions. There will be some parents who would rather not have their child at school during this period, who have had concerns about covid. We put in a lot of safety measures in our special schools to keep them safe, including now the testing we are doing, especially for staff in special schools but also giving them bespoke guidance on how to keep safe, how to do their testing.

Many therapists were redeployed to other jobs in the healthcare settings during the first lockdown, but we have made it clear that they can be



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back in schools and should be back in schools delivering therapies and other treatments, again working with the chief nurse on that.

For children who are SEND, such as dyspraxia or dyslexia, schools have some flexibility on who they see as vulnerable. They have seen all of their children last term and can make the one-by-one decision to bring the child back in under the other vulnerable category. Many schools have been doing that.

Q409 Chair: Thank you. Nick, you do not need to respond to this, but my final observation of this is that you have come to the Committee with an Aunt Sally because not one person has asked you about changing the curriculum. What we wanted was for you to acknowledge that there is a genuine problem and not just pick off the first think tank report and say it is down to poverty and then maybe suggest targeted interventions to deal with the problem of the underperformance of disadvantaged white working class boys and girls. The curriculum argument has been an Aunt Sally. Not one member has asked you about that side of things. That is where I am coming from. I cannot speak for all the members.

Nick Gibb: No, but you are not the only people commenting on these issues. There is a strand of opinion that says children at age 14 should be focused on a different career path if they are from a disadvantaged background or if they are less able academically than others. That is what I am trying to address. If you take the approach that some of these successful schools are taking—the Michaelas, the Harrises, the ARKs schools, the Dixons, the Star Academies and so on—you see a quality education with good behaviour, making sure that children are doing their homework and so on, behaving well in school, attending, and you close the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and other children. That is what we are seeking to do and, it is beginning to work. The 2018 PISA report shows 15-year-olds in England performing above the average in the OECD for reading, maths and science for the first time. Performance in maths improved significantly, particularly for low-attaining pupils.

The point I am trying to make is that the approach we have been taking since 2010, which has not been universally supported, is resulting in better attainment by children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although I welcome the work you are doing as a Committee to identify the different causes of why disadvantaged children from different ethnic groups perform differently, all disadvantaged children, whatever their ethnic background, perform less well than non-disadvantaged children from those ethnic backgrounds. Our objective since 2010 has been to tackle disadvantage and to make sure that the quality of the education those disadvantaged children are getting is on a par with what children from more advantaged backgrounds get. That is the driving force of everything we have been doing.

Q410 Chair: The disadvantaged, of which there are the most in number are doing the worst.



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Nick Gibb: But they are improving. That is my point, that this works. If you go to those schools that I have identified, you will see that the attainment gap is virtually disappearing. If you look at the overall national data for disadvantaged children, whether it is in reading, maths, EBacc entry or GCSEs, you will see that the outcomes for disadvantaged children are also improving.

None of this has been easy, Robert, as you know. I know you support many of the things that we have been doing, but it is not easy. We just have to keep our nerve and keep doing the same things. I believe the reforms to initial teacher training that we are introducing now will help to speed up the process even further.

Q411 **Chair:** Thank you, Nick. Vicky, do you have time? We are overrunning a bit but we have a few questions for you. Whether you are happy to stay or leave, Nick, and you probably have lots of things to do, I very much appreciate your coming today and having this debate, and for being a regular to our Committee. It is greatly appreciated.

Nick Gibb: Thank you. I will slip away, but I have enjoyed our discussion and I wish the Committee every success. You are doing a very important piece of work. Thank you very much.