

## Written evidence submitted by Professor Lee Elliot Major

Submission to the House of Commons Education Committee  
Left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds

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### Summary

White pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) have for many decades made up the majority of education's left behind - pupils who leave school without basic skills or expected achievement levels.

White FSM pupils are the largest ethnic disadvantaged group failing to reach national school benchmarks at age 16. Each year around 50,000 white pupils, about two thirds of FSM pupils, are entered for GCSEs in England; around 35,000 fail to reach obtain 5 or more A\*-C grades at GCSE including English and Maths.

White FSM children are half as likely as other FSM pupils for example to achieve a strong pass (grade 5 or higher) in the 8 GCSEs in the Government's attainment 8 measure.

This failure leads to lifelong scarring: low earnings, poor job opportunities, poor health, and greater likelihood of depression and imprisonment. It has a lasting national legacy: creating deeper divides in society and damaging the nation's economic productivity.

Disentangling the factors driving this underperformance is difficult, but multi-dimensional poverty, instability, inequality and unemployment are profoundly important to white FSM pupils as any other pupils. We also need to challenge the assumption that the white working class is one homogenous cultural group.

A particular vulnerability for white working class pupils appears to be poor reading levels early in secondary school which stymies their subsequent learning. This is a particular challenge for boys.

Much of the research adopts a deficit-model, often imposing middle class, academic-oriented values, identifying what is wrong with this group of children and the various ways they, their families and communities are believed to be lacking.

A major weakness in Britain has been the education-work interface, and opportunities for retraining throughout people's careers.

There are serious concerns that the Covid-19 pandemic will worsen the prospects for this neglected group of children, amid growing economic and education divides.

A central question is whether we need to change the current education model to make it more engaging for all pupils with creative, vocational as well as academic talents while maintaining standards. Rather than trying to shoehorn individuals into a narrow academic system, should we reform the system to cater for a wider range of individuals?

A dual approach to upper secondary schools would offer a credible vocational stream, linked with employers, alongside current academic routes, and including a school certificate that all pupils would be required to pass.

More research is needed to hear the perspectives and voices of those left behind by the education system.

## Introduction

This submission reviews evidence on white pupils on free school meals as a whole, considering average values on their outcomes and characteristics across the country. Yet it is far from clear how much in common white pupils on free school meals have in Sunderland, Southwark, Scarborough or Southampton. Often when it comes to education there is more variation within defined groups than between them.

It's also the case that many of the factors underpinning the school performance of white working class pupils apply equally to poorer pupils from other ethnic groups.

This is a major national problem as the numbers of white pupils on free school meals are large. Each year around 50,000 white pupils, about two thirds of all FSM pupils, are entered for GCSEs in England; around 35,000 fail to reach the national benchmark of 5 or more A\*-C grades at GCSE, including English and Maths. Meanwhile around another 125,000 white pupils fail to meet this national benchmark, many of whom will be disadvantaged despite not qualifying for free school meals. In total white pupils make up around two thirds of all pupils not reaching this benchmark in England.

Eligibility for free school meals is a pragmatic way of categorising disadvantage at an individual level. This is a measure of income, distinct from parental education background, or social class, which considers the occupations of parents, or social status which considers the attitudes and tastes that distinguish people. But white pupils on free school meals is often used as a proxy for 'white working class' pupils.

Like any measure of poverty it also has its limitations: there are large variations in academic achievement among apparently similar FSM pupils living in different parts of the country. These

are likely to reflect differences in home and community environments. FSM is also a binary measure; it doesn't reflect the gradations of disadvantage and advantage across pupil populations. More disadvantaged areas are likely to have greater numbers of pupils who have experienced longer term disadvantage. Most studies apply to England only.

### Left behind

Few education topics have attracted as much attention, controversy and frustration as the underachievement of white working class pupils. What is in little doubt is that white pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), have for many decades been among education's left behind. At the same time policy responses have seemingly failed to address the issue.

White pupils make up the majority of pupils who leave school every year lacking the basic English and maths skills needed to get on and prosper in life. This is a smaller sub-set of pupils than the third of children failing to achieve 5 or more A\*-C grades at GCSE, including English and Maths in England.

Leaving school unable to digest simple figures and words leads to lifelong scarring: low earnings, poor job opportunities, poor health, and greater likelihood of depression and imprisonment. It has a lasting national legacy: millions of adults are incapable of dealing with the challenges of everyday life. This has profound consequences for the country: creating deeper divides in society and damaging our economic productivity.

The poor education performance of white FSM pupils occurs across successive education stages, from the start of primary school to the end of secondary school and beyond, and across a range of outcomes, from securing basic skills to achieving the highest grades needed to gain entry into highly selective universities. White boys on free school meals tend to do less well than white girls on free school meals.

Analysis of children tracked in the UK Millennium Cohort Study mirrors the trends observed in the annual official statistics for examinations.<sup>1</sup>

Just over 28 per cent of white children on Free School Meals in state schools achieved 5 or more A\*-C grades at GCSE, including English and Maths in England (excluding equivalent qualifications). This compares with around 43 per cent of non-white children on Free School Meals (and 67 per cent of non-FSM white children and 68 per cent of non-FSM non-white children).

Similar gaps persist for official Government measures of school performance in England. Around 8 per cent of white children on Free School Meals in state schools achieved a strong pass (grade 5 or higher) in the 8 GCSEs classified in the Government's attainment 8 measure. This compares with around 16 per cent of non-white children on Free School Meals (and 32 per cent of non-FSM white children and 35 per cent of non-FSM non-white children).

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<sup>1</sup> Data supplied by the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies. The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) follows the lives of 19,517 children born across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2000-01.

The pupils also make less progress between the end of primary school and the end of secondary school compared with other pupils. Around 28 per cent of white children on Free School Meals in state schools achieved a positive score in the Government's Progress 8 measure. This compares with around 46 per cent of non-white children on Free School Meals (and 53 per cent of non-FSM white children and 64 per cent of non-FSM non-white children).

### *Regional variation*

A wide variation in education outcomes exists within the cohort of white pupils who are eligible for FSM across different places of the country. In the best performing boroughs white working class pupils are nearly four times as likely to reach national benchmarks at age 16 as those in the worst performing boroughs. White FSM children perform particularly poorly in a range of areas, including in cities (Nottingham), coastal areas (Isle of Wight, Southend-on-Sea) and rural areas (Herefordshire). They perform unusually well in many (but not all) London boroughs.

The question unanswered by the research is to what extent this regional variation is due to outside school factors (differences in long term disadvantage and particular community contexts) and inside school factors (for example quality of teaching).

## Principal factors contributing to underachievement

Disaggregating and interpreting the range of factors driving this underperformance is difficult as most studies have only produced correlational not causal evidence. A multitude of possible explanations have been advocated.

Studies suggest that the majority of the variance in pupil scores is explained by individual background factors and home environment as opposed to school factors. This is hardly surprising given that children spend most of their lives outside the classroom. Levels of multi-dimensional poverty, instability, inequality, unemployment outside schools are profoundly important to white pupils on free school meals as any other pupils. Disentangling family and school influences in studies is extremely difficult.

This said, there is also strong evidence that poorer pupils gain particularly from good teaching. Students taught by highly effective teachers enjoy long-term benefits. A particular vulnerability for white working class pupils appears to be poor reading levels early in secondary school which stymies their subsequent learning.

### *Deficit-models*

One of the problems with much of the research on white working class pupils (as with other poorer pupils) is that it adopts a deficit-model, often imposing middle class, academic-oriented views and values, identifying what is wrong with this group of children and the various ways they, their families and communities are believed to be lacking. A recurring narrative is a lack of aspiration for further education among parents and children which needs to be addressed. Lack of parental engagement is also cited. Others suggest a lack of self-belief among white working-class families.

However, an alternative explanation is that the aspirations among these communities are, in fact, just different to those in mainstream education. They are effectively rejecting the model they see as being imposed on them – an academic race they are unlikely to win or benefit from. One argument is that many white working class families have lived in similar areas for generations, and would rather stay and work in those communities. Government efforts to ensure academic prospects are not the exclusive preserve of more privileged pupils have drifted into flawed assumptions that all children should pursue an academic education.

### *Education-work links*

Another related claim is that white working class pupils are less likely to see the link between educational attainment and future careers. Some studies have found that many pupils judged as underachieving are capable of engagement and success when taking part in creative, practical activities that fit with their sense of self.

A major weakness in Britain for a long time has been the education-work interface, and opportunities for retraining throughout people's careers. The poorest adults with the lowest qualifications are the least likely to access training, despite being the group who would benefit

most from them. Britain has one of the lowest levels of on-the-job training for workers among developed nations. Surveys suggest half of adults from the lowest socioeconomic groups have received no training since leaving school.

## Effects of COVID-19

There are serious concerns that the Covid-19 pandemic will worsen the prospects for this neglected group of children, amid growing economic and education divides. It could lead to declining social mobility in areas of the country and industries where many white working class communities live and work.

Low social mobility in particular areas of the country appears to be due to a combination of factors – low performing schools, a lack of local jobs, multigenerational poverty, poor transport links. Many social mobility ‘coldspots’ in the North and Midlands of England which once benefitted from the manufacturing and mining industries never recovered from the deep recession of the early 1980s, and still suffer high rates of joblessness. Many of these areas have the highest under-attainment of FSM pupils.

The stagnation of many of the UK’s communities in rural areas, former industrial centres and seaside towns, are a reminder of the difficult question left unanswered by many social mobility debates: it is all well and good to catapult a few lucky people away into universities and jobs elsewhere, but what about the communities left behind? Areas of the country that rely on extremely vulnerable industrial sectors are most likely to see long term unemployment.

The danger for many disadvantaged pupils is that the Covid-19 crisis will lead to permanent economic and educational scarring – long-lasting negative impacts on life prospects. Potential scarring effects for the under-25s could result from spells of long-term unemployment and failure to achieve the exam grades needed to pursue the next steps in education or employment. The worst hit employees in terms of job or earnings losses are the young and the low-paid.

Learning losses during widespread partial school closures are set to cancel out any marginal gains in narrowing the achievement gap during the previous decade. Education scarring can occur at key education transition points, where selection into different pathways creates a step-change in outcomes. For example, failing to get standard passes in GCSEs at age 16 incurs a big earnings penalty – even by a single mark below the pass threshold. With high rates of unemployment, employers are likely to place even more emphasis on the minimum grades required in English and mathematics in GCSEs.

## Priorities for the Government

Many laudable efforts to boost social mobility have focused on ensuring children from all backgrounds are able to succeed in studying an increasingly academic curriculum in schools and enter the country’s most prestigious universities and elite professions. Yet this drive has often slipped into a lazy assumption that this particular route in life should be the goal for everyone. Improving social mobility should be about helping children to make their own informed choices as to what they want to achieve and pursue the particular path that is right for them.

This appears to be a particular challenge for white pupils on free school meals. Like any other pupils their backgrounds should not prevent them from pursuing an academic path. But the

question for policy-makers is whether we need to change the current school model and curriculum to make it more engaging for all pupils with creative, vocational as well as academic talents while maintaining standards for all children. Rather than trying to shoehorn individuals into a narrow academic system, should we reform the system to cater for a wider range of individuals?

International comparisons point to two areas where the UK could do far better: preparing all school leavers with basic life skills, and offering a credible vocational option for pupils, closely linked with employers.

A dual approach to upper secondary schools would offer a credible vocational stream, linked with employers, alongside current academic routes. Under a dual approach, all pupils would be assessed against a basic threshold of key skills required to get on in life, including functional maths and English. Maths and English language GCSEs could each be split into two separate qualifications: a compulsory test examining basic numeracy and literacy skills; and a separate exam for pupils pursuing more academic study.

In contrast to the UK, in Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Denmark and Norway, between 30 and 70 per cent of upper secondary school students participate in vocational streams, with many pupils undertaking an apprenticeship as part of a senior secondary certificate.

Meanwhile, the apprenticeship levy could be re-cast as a lifelong learning levy to train and retrain people at all ages and stages of their career is one option. This would provide equal support for the half of the population pursuing a different path to university.

At the same time there is a need to redistribute jobs across the country so young people can aspire to future opportunities where-ever they live. Job guarantees, with compulsory training, could be introduced for young people who are in danger of becoming long term unemployed. These jobs could be productive for the country in other ways, creating a more sustainable environment, or giving back through tutoring, for example.

Other potential education reforms that could improve prospects include: extra tutoring outside schools, a focus on reading at earlier ages, children's zones that provide wraparound support for pupils, and a regional weighting for pupil premium money for disadvantaged pupils providing significantly more money to turn around areas of multigenerational decline.

We could also do more to develop a longer term strategy to address disadvantage from early years onwards throughout the educational system.

Finally more research is needed to understand the potential variations in characteristics and conditions of the large group of children classified as white working class, and the extent to which factors underpinning their school performance apply equally to poorer pupils from other ethnic groups. We need also to hear the perspectives and voices of those left behind by the education system.



Lee Elliot Major OBE is Britain's first Professor of Social Mobility, based at the University of Exeter. His Penguin book *Social Mobility and Its Enemies*, co-authored with Stephen Machin, has attracted attention across the world. He was formerly Chief Executive of the Sutton Trust.

The Centre for Social Mobility at the University of Exeter is the UK's only university centre dedicated to improving social mobility through evidence-informed practice and policy. The centre's goal is to help disadvantaged young people so they do better at school, access higher education and succeed at university.

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July 2020