



'There is only so much we can do'

School staff in England on the impact of poverty on children and school life

September 2023



Summary

4.2 million children in the UK are growing up in poverty. That’s 9 children in an average classroom of 30. The causal relationship between child poverty and educational outcomes is well established, with children from lower-income households less likely to achieve than their more affluent peers.¹ This results in unequal life chances and futures, with children growing up in poverty earning less as adults.²

People working in schools witness the impact of poverty on children and families on a daily basis, and the scale and severity of the problem mean schools are reeling up against it. To understand exactly how child poverty affects the whole school system in England, the Education Anti-Poverty Coalition, convened by Child Poverty Action Group, has conducted a first-of-its-kind survey of professionals working in every role in schools in England. The survey, completed by over 1,000 professionals, represents the views of head teachers, senior leaders, teachers, governors, teaching support staff, administrators, catering teams and facilities managers. By asking all members of school staff, we’ve gathered a unique and full picture of the effects of child poverty, and conclude that it leaves no part of children’s learning and the school system untouched.

The results show that child poverty in schools is getting worse and increasingly stealing children’s learning, with school staff reporting that pupils are frequently tired and hungry, worried, unable to concentrate, and without the equipment they need to engage with the curriculum. **School staff are also being heavily diverted from other parts of their roles as they seek to address the poverty-related needs of their school community.** This often means going beyond their remit and skillset. This is bad for schools, and children are paying the highest price.

79 per cent

The proportion of school staff who say they and their colleagues increasingly have less time and capacity for other parts of their roles because of the effects of child poverty.

74 per cent

The proportion of school staff who say there is evidence that children in poverty are falling further behind than previously at school.

80 per cent

The proportion of school staff who say providing universal free school meals to all school children would reduce child poverty in their school.

Schools are also facing a tidal wave of other challenges: funding pressures leading to major staff cuts; rising costs; old and failing buildings, severe underfunding for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities; and dramatic cuts to other services. Schools are trying to plug all the gaps without the required resources. However, school staff are adamant that while child poverty continues to rip through the education system, everyone loses out.

The survey finds that the vast majority of professionals working in England’s schools want the government to do more to tackle child poverty. Addressing child poverty, primarily by increasing family incomes, must be a central thread to any government’s education strategy, enabling children to learn and lifting an enormous weight off schools. School staff have also identified immediate steps for government to take that would go some way to

¹ K Stewart and K Cooper, ‘Does Money Affect Children’s Outcomes? An update’, *CASEpaper*, 2017

² Education Policy Institute, *Covid-19 and Disadvantage gaps in England 2020*, February 2022

reducing poverty and hardship among children, helping pupils to learn and enabling staff to focus on the core part of their roles:

1. **Expanding free school meals entitlement.** School staff are seeing increased levels of hunger at school and are emphatically calling for free school meals to be provided to all school children to help address this. CPAG estimates that rolling out universal free school meals in England would cost around £2 billion.³
2. **Increasing financial support to low-income and middle-income families.** To significantly reduce child poverty and its impact on schools and pupils, school staff clearly identify that families need more money. This can be achieved through increasing child benefit. Increasing child benefit by £20 a week would see 500,000 children pulled out of poverty, at a cost of £10 billion.⁴
3. **Providing more support with school costs eg, school uniforms and trips.** Providing direct support to lower-income families with school costs would take the financial strain off parents, lighten the load for school staff and enable pupils to make the most of school life. As a first step, support with uniform costs through the introduction of a nationally-available uniform grant for eligible families would be a significant help.

The reality in England’s schools today

School staff overwhelmingly report the situation for children and families is getting much worse

‘[I’ve noticed] students not having basics of equipment when coming to school. Students waiting for buses in the pouring rain without any raincoats. Pupils’ lack of concentration as they are hungry.’ (Secondary governor, South West)

‘Two pupils [were] caught stealing food from other pupils’ lunchboxes.’ (Primary governor, South West)

‘Children come to school concerned about their housing and home situations.’ (Primary governor, Yorkshire and the Humber)

‘More children are expressing feeling worried about their family finances, or overhearing conversations or arguments about money at home. Children seem more aware of the financial pressures adults are under. Some children tell me they avoid asking their parents for essential equipment, or telling them about clubs and trips, as they do not want to add to their financial stress.’ (Secondary pupil support and welfare, West Midlands)

‘Pupils [are] desperate to find after school or weekend jobs to support family finances.’ (Counsellor, North West)

‘Children [are] tired and lethargic, extremely hungry.’ (Primary teaching assistant, South West)

‘Children [don’t have] a water bottle because they don’t want to ask parents to buy one, children [are] worrying about the cost of trips.’ (Primary teacher, North West)

³ This figure is an estimate of the cost of meals. It does not include capital costs or workforce costs.

⁴ R Statham and H Parkes, *A lifeline for families – investing to reduce child poverty this winter*, IPPR, 2022

'Worn clothing and footwear, learners complaining of being hungry and seeking more food during the day / seconds at lunch time, inability to concentrate, admitting they can't get xyz [items for school] till home [their parents] receive their pay (living pay check to pay check).' (Secondary special educational needs teacher, North East)

Frontline education staff working in schools are overwhelmingly seeing levels of child poverty and family hardship increasing. While child poverty is not new and rates have been steadily rising over the last decade⁵ with clear implications for pupils and schools, recent cost of living pressures have led to further increases in the number of families facing financial difficulties, and to much greater difficulties for families who were already struggling to make ends meet:

- Almost all respondents surveyed (89 per cent) believe that **child poverty in their school has increased in the last two academic years**. This increases to 97 per cent for head teachers and senior leaders, and 95 per cent for governors.
- Eighty-eight per cent of school staff reported that increasing numbers of families in their school who previously appeared to be managing financially were now struggling to cope.
- Four out of five school staff (82 per cent) believe that the reason poverty is having a greater effect on children's education (see below) is because **the depth of poverty has worsened over the last two academic years**, meaning that families are even further away from being able to make ends meet.
- This growing and deepening financial hardship presents itself in many ways across the school day. School staff in every role say they are noticing more families struggling with uniform and P.E. kit requirements (78 per cent) and more children coming to school in ill-fitting or worn-out clothes (72 per cent). When it comes to lunchtime, school staff report that more children do not have enough money to buy enough food (68 per cent of those surveyed), and more children are struggling to concentrate on learning due to hunger and fatigue (46 per cent of respondents).

School staff are increasingly being diverted from their core roles and responsibilities to deal with the effects of child poverty in schools

'An inordinate amount of time is spent dealing with issues around poverty.' (All-through senior school leader, London)

'Poverty is placing a huge pressure on families - whether it's taking extra hours [of work], mental health problems, or not being able to stretch for additional resources at home it's all bleeding into the school community... families are really struggling & there is only so much we can do within school.' (Primary governor, London)

'Staff are increasingly concerned and have been spending more time helping vulnerable families. This leads to members of staff having to leave their allocated roles to attend to pupils and also to contact statutory services to seek assistance and advice.' (Primary teaching assistant, North West)

⁵ Department for Work and Pensions, *Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2022, 2023*

'Staff [are] spending time sourcing equipment for homes eg, washing machine, carpets etc. Applying for hardship fund grants, food bank vouchers etc.' (Primary admin and management, East Midlands)

'As a school we will provide what families need, however, this is having an increasing impact on school resource and budgets which are already maximised.' (Pupil referral unit head teacher, North East)

"Schools are becoming increasingly less about educating students and more about supporting families..." (Primary teaching assistant, East of England)

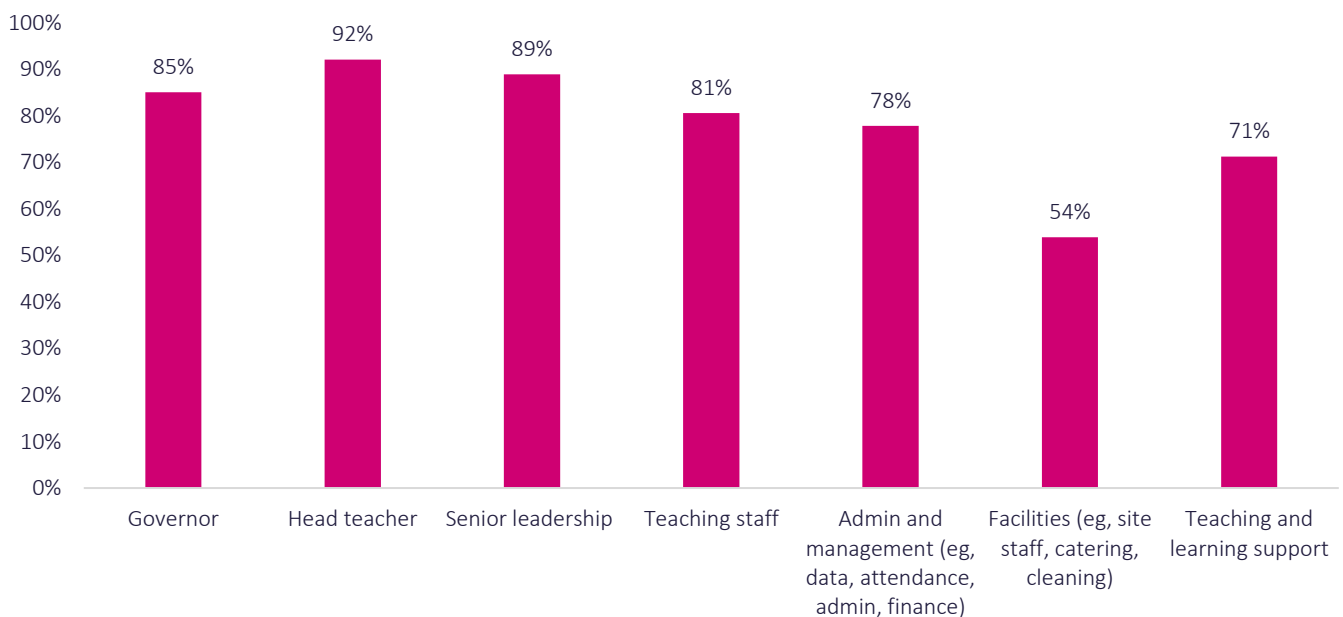
'Many more parents [are] coming to the school for advice. Our family support worker is busier than she has ever been.' (Primary head teacher, London)

'Children [are] coming to school hungry not having [had] breakfast and we have to feed them which takes us away from our normal routine... also children coming to school in the wrong/too small clothes. [We're] having to find clothes.' (Primary teaching assistant, South East)

School staff are spending a growing proportion of their working day supporting pupils and families with poverty-related issues. Their time is being diverted to giving advice and guidance to families who are struggling financially, for example seeking food, clothing and housing support; following up on dinner money debt; responding to school absences related to travel costs; and making referrals to specialist services. Carrying out these tasks means significantly less time for other parts of their roles:

- **Seventy-nine per cent of all school staff reported that managing the effects of child poverty in their school is taking up an increasing amount of staff time, leaving them with less time and capacity for other parts of their roles.** This rises to 92 per cent for head teachers and 89 per cent for senior leadership.

Figure 1: Percentage of staff by role who report effects of child poverty in their school are taking up an increasing amount of staff time, leaving schools with less time and capacity for other parts of their roles



- At the same time, half (51 per cent) of school staff report that schools have **less capacity to support struggling families and children**, with staffing cuts being cited as one reason for this.
- **Fifty-nine per cent** of school staff think that there are **fewer support services** for children and families outside of school than two years ago, which contributes to pressure. At the same time, 70 per cent of head teachers report an increase in parents asking for help with essentials such as food or clothing, **suggesting that families are directly asking school leaders and communities for help more often.**

Poverty is compromising children's learning and children in lower-income families are finding it harder to catch up

'I think our low-income children are falling further behind than ever before' (Primary senior leader, South East)

'Families are struggling financially and emotionally, and children are becoming more stressed and anxious. Pupils are not ready to learn.' (Primary teaching assistant, North West)

'Lack of space having a negative impact on [student's] ability to study/do homework. More students arriving to school without eating breakfast and parents unable to top up their dinner money through lack of funds/cost of living rise. This impacts on their ability to focus and concentrate meaning they will not meet their full potential.' (Secondary pupil support and welfare, London)

'Children can't do homework online as they don't have devices at home. Often they don't even have pencils, coloured pencils or other resources to do homework at home.' (Primary teaching assistant, Yorkshire and the Humber)

'[There is] absenteeism due to the costs of travel and also increased fatigue due to students undertaking more paid work to support themselves and their families.' (Sixth form specialist, London)

Lesson time and learning are being significantly affected by high levels of child poverty. The survey responses show that pupils are frequently tired and hungry, unable to concentrate, and without the resources and equipment they need to fully engage with the curriculum. Following a pandemic where many children's learning was affected, school staff report that those in poverty, with the added pressures of the cost of living crisis, are increasingly struggling to catch up:

- **Three-quarters** of all school staff (74 per cent) said there is evidence that children growing up in poverty **have fallen further behind** their peers in learning in the last two years, compared to previous years.
 - **More than half (53 per cent)** of all teachers reported an **increase in the number of pupils struggling to concentrate** on learning due to hunger and fatigue.
 - **Seventy-six per cent of secondary school staff** have seen an increase in pupils not having all the equipment and resources they need for lessons.
- Eighty-four per cent of all school staff told us that the effects of poverty on **pupils' ability to learn and participate** in school have worsened over the last two years.

- **Nearly three in four** school staff (73 per cent) stated that they are concerned the lasting effects of the Covid-19 pandemic has made the impact of poverty on education worse.

Imagining better for pupils and schools in England

School staff across England are clear that, with governmental will and action, child poverty can be reduced and children can thrive at school

'Children need a brighter, more hopeful future.' (All-through senior leader, Yorkshire and the Humber)

While schools and school staff have in many cases risen to the growing challenge of providing support to families and pupils who are struggling, this cannot continue. Schools cannot solve child poverty; the efforts staff are making to deal with the effects of child poverty are pushing schools to their limits. And poverty is stealing children's educations.

School staff overwhelmingly believe that the government should do more to support struggling families, with 82 per cent calling for this. When asked which policies would have the biggest effect on reducing child poverty in their school:

- Eighty per cent of school staff said **providing universal free school meals to all school children**.
- Nearly two in three (63 per cent) said **increasing the amount of financial support low-income and middle-income families with children receive**.
- Sixty-eight per cent said more government **help for families with school costs** such as uniform and school trips.

'Some children are coming to school hungry... all children of school age should be given a free school lunch not just infants.' (Primary facilities staff member, North East)

Whole school communities in England – head teachers, teachers, governors, teaching support staff, administrators, catering teams and facilities managers – want to see real and urgent action from the government to tackle child poverty and support schools. They know it doesn't have to be like this.

Recommendations

A comprehensive plan to eradicate child poverty must sit at the heart of any government's education strategy, with a cross departmental approach, child poverty reduction targets and a long-term focus on increasing family incomes. However, school staff across England have also strongly indicated that there are immediate steps for government to take that would go some way to reducing poverty and hardship among children, helping pupils to learn and enabling staff to focus on the core parts of their roles.

1. Expanding free school meal entitlements

Rolling-out universal free school meals can relieve pressure on household budgets, prevent hunger in the classroom and make the school day more equitable. However, current eligibility criteria are far too stringent.⁶ CPAG’s analysis shows that 900,000 children in poverty in England do not currently qualify for either of the two nationally-provided free school meals schemes (universal infant and means-tested).^{7 8} There are also wider benefits to universal free school meals. They can help to boost children’s learning and attainment,⁹ as well as supporting their health.¹⁰ CPAG estimates that rolling out universal free school meals in England would cost around £2 billion.¹¹

2. Increase child benefit

Increasing child benefit would reduce child poverty while also supporting the income security of low- and middle-income families who have seen their budgets stretched significantly. With reduced poverty and hardship levels, schools and pupils would greatly benefit. Real-terms cuts to child benefit mean it has lost 25 per cent of its value since 2010.¹² Increasing child benefit by £20 a week would see 500,000 children pulled out of poverty, at a cost of £10 billion.¹³

3. Provide more help with school costs

Alongside efforts from schools to prioritise affordability, providing **direct support to lower-income families with school costs**, such as school uniforms and trips, would take the financial strain off parents, lighten the load for school staff and enable pupils to make the most of school life. As a first step, help with uniform costs through the introduction of a nationally-available uniform grant for eligible families would be a significant help. England is the only UK nation that does not currently provide this.

Conclusion

Through this survey, whole school communities across England have described how poverty is standing in the way of children’s learning and potential. School staff in all roles have **overwhelmingly reported that child poverty has worsened in their school in the last two academic years**. The results show that no part of children’s learning and the school system is left untouched, with school staff reporting that pupils are frequently tired and hungry, unable to concentrate, and without the resources and equipment they need to fully engage with the curriculum. Educators see clear evidence that children from low-income families are now falling even further behind.

⁶ From Year 3 onwards, provision of free school meals is means-tested, with the threshold to get free school meals for families in receipt of universal credit being a combined household income of £7,400 or less before benefits

⁷ CPAG, *Free school meals: third of kids in poverty miss out*, 2023

⁸ The provision of free school meals to all children in Years 3-6 in London means 90,000 of the 900,000 are covered for next year. This is welcome, but it is the responsibility of the national government to make sure no child goes hungry at school. Free school meals shouldn’t be a postcode lottery.

⁹ Lund University, *Free and nutritious school lunches help create richer and healthier adults*, 2021

¹⁰ Nuffield Foundation, *Impact of the universal infant free school meal policy*, 2020

¹¹ This figure is an estimate of the cost of meals. It does not include capital costs or workforce costs.

¹² Author’s calculations using CPI All Items Index, Office for National Statistics, 2022; Child benefit rates; Economic and fiscal outlook – November 2022, Office for Budget Responsibility, 2022

¹³ R Statham and H Parkes, *A lifeline for families – investing to reduce child poverty this winter*, IPPR, 2022

Schools are reeling under the strain of child poverty. Poverty is **increasingly stealing children's learning**, and **school staff are being heavily diverted from other parts of their roles as they seek to address the poverty-related needs of their school communities**. School staff from head teachers to admin and management teams are reporting that child poverty is taking up an **increasing amount of staff time in their school, leaving staff with less time and capacity for other parts of their roles**. They also described there being fewer places for families to turn to for support outside of school. At the same time, schools' budgets are already beyond breaking point and staffing cuts mean remaining staff have less time to try to connect financially hard-up families to support and to plug gaps.

It doesn't have to be like this. **School staff across England are clear that, with governmental will and action, child poverty can be reduced and children can thrive at school**. A comprehensive plan to eradicate child poverty must sit at the heart of any government's education strategy. Children, our school system and the UK's economic future will all benefit when child poverty levels are proactively reduced. However, school staff have also identified immediate steps that would significantly reduce poverty and hardship among children, helping pupils to learn and enabling staff to focus on the core part of their roles: **providing free school meals to all school children, increasing financial support to low-income and middle-income families – which can be achieved through increasing child benefit – and providing more support for school costs**. The Education Anti-Poverty Coalition's members share deep concerns about the impact of poverty on children, on their learning and potential, and its impact on the wider school system. It's time to imagine and do better for children. We are calling for urgent and meaningful action from the Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions and wider UK government to tackle child poverty.

Methodology

The survey was completed by 1,023 people working in or with schools in England. Education Anti-Poverty Coalition member organisations shared the survey with their members, the survey was also shared with schools across England and promoted on social media. Participants of the survey were self-selecting.

Role	Number of respondents
Governor/Trustee	41
Head teacher	88
Senior leadership	101
Teaching staff	242
Admin and management (eg, data, attendance, admin, finance)	63
Facilities (eg, site staff, catering, cleaning)	26
Teaching and learning support (eg, teaching assistant, cover supervisor)	339
Specialist and technical (eg, librarian, technician, sports coach)	34
Pupil support and welfare (learning mentor, parent support adviser, lunch time supervisor)	87
Parent-teacher association (PTA) member	2
Total	1,023

Region	Number of respondents
London	117
North East	145
North West	252
Yorkshire and the Humber	131
East Midlands	81
West Midlands	89
South East	102
East of England	52
South West	54
Total	1,023

Type of school / setting	Number of respondents
Primary	565
Secondary	319
All-through	45
Special School Primary	18
Special School Secondary	23
Pupil Referral Unit	9
Other	44
Total	1,023

About CPAG

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights. CPAG is a charity registered in England and Wales (registration number 294841) and in Scotland (registration number SC039339), 30 Micawber Street, London N1 7TB.

About the Education Anti-Poverty Coalition

The Education Anti-Poverty Coalition represents governors, head teachers, teachers, school support staff, PTAs and others working in education across England. All members share a deep concern about the impact child poverty and hardship are having on the children we work with and our school system. We collectively call for action that will reduce child poverty. If we want all children and schools to thrive, we must address child poverty first. Signatory members of the coalition are The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), The Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY), Child Poverty Action Group, Children North East, The Children's Society, National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), National Education Union (NEU), National Literacy Trust, Parentkind, UNISON and Newcastle University Institute for Social Science.