



Child Poverty Action Group and the NEU's child poverty and education briefing

May 2024

Introduction

There are 4.5 million children growing up in poverty in the UK. That is an average of nine children in a classroom of 30 and this is a number that is set to increase. Any serious action to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of children from lower-income households must start by acknowledging that differences outside of the school gates can never be fully remedied by classroom interventions. However, while schools cannot solve child poverty, they can mitigate some of its impacts and support children to fulfil their potential.

'Action by teachers could not, on its own, change classrooms, let alone society; there is a world that shapes the classroom and is not 'made' by teachers and their pupils.' [Prof Michael Young discussing the work of Prof Geoff Whitty, 2022](#)

This briefing, from Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and the NEU, lays out from an education perspective what is needed to reduce child poverty, alleviate the negative impacts of poverty on children's education, and to empower schools to ensure all children can thrive in education. This package of policies, supported by school staff, draws on our analysis of what is needed for children in poverty:

1. Increasing family incomes
2. Alleviating income-related inequalities in education
3. Removing barriers to education and reducing the cost of the school day

For schools to play their part in breaking down barriers to opportunity, they must start from a secure and sustainable position. The following policy recommendations are not in place of, but must be in addition to, the adequate funding of the education system which must include additional investment in the workforce and estates. Any work to alleviate poverty must also consider its intersections with other characteristics. The Government must pay particular attention to Black children and children with SEND, who can face additional barriers to escaping the trap of poverty.

The policy recommendations detailed in this document are rooted in a vision of what a school day would be like for a child if poverty-related barriers were removed.

What would the school day look like if poverty-related barriers were removed?

Children wake up in a warm home, there is food available and there are no money worries. Children have all the comfortable, weather-appropriate clothing they need for school. Travel to school is freely available, efficient and reliable.

When they arrive at school, children feel safe, welcome and included by their peers and school staff. In the classroom, children are provided with everything they need to take part in lessons, for example, pens, books and calculators. No one is sanctioned for a lack of equipment or missing uniform and approaches to behaviour are trauma informed. Schools are properly funded to ensure they can support any pupils who need it with access to equipment such as digital devices. The curriculum values all backgrounds and is relatable for all pupils. Schools support and track progress across a range of outcomes, not just academic attainment.

Lunchtime is regarded as a key part of the school day, with all children accessing delicious and nutritious food that meets their requirements, in an environment that supports them to socialise and try new foods.

Both within and beyond the curriculum all children have exposure and access to a range of sporting, musical and cultural opportunities, to help explore interests, skills and have fun with others before, during and after school. School trips are designed so that everyone can attend, and all children are able to participate in events at school without money being an issue, for example, discos and school fayres.

At the end of the day, school facilities and resources are utilised and available for pupils to use to complete homework or revision. When children get home, they have what they need to support learning, for example, laptops, internet and books. Where children and families have wider support needs, for example, mental health or SEND, the school is equipped to either support or signpost families to the right services.

Household income does not affect a child's ability to take part, learn and enjoy all that school offers. There is no means testing of pupils throughout the day. Children and young people's views, rights and experiences are respected and help to shape school life. School staff have more time and capacity to focus on the core parts of their roles, with poverty-related pressures removed. To realise this vision would be to realise a school system that is truly comprehensive and universally provided for all. Without this, it is difficult to see how class ceilings and barriers to opportunity will ever be truly broken down.

Below we outline the policy reforms needed to realise this vision for children in poverty.

1. Increasing family incomes

'... so many children telling us they are not sleeping at night because they are too cold – it is horrifying.' Teacher, NEU State of Education 2024

Teachers frequently and increasingly report how poverty impacts on pupils and their ability to learn. 86 per cent of teachers say their pupils show signs of fatigue as a result of poverty (NEU State of Education, 2024). 79 per cent of school staff say they and their colleagues increasingly have less time and capacity for other parts of their roles because of the effects of child poverty (CPAG, 2023). Household income is the strongest predictor of how well a child will achieve at school. Poverty holds children back and means they are less able to thrive at school.

'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

Any work to improve poorer children's experience of school will have limited impact while family incomes are inadequate. Investing in our social security system is by far the most effective way to help children get on at school.

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

Steps that must be taken:

a) Scrap the two-child limit

- The two-child limit is a significant force behind the increase in child poverty. Since the current Government came to office, every day the two-child limit remains in place 109 children are pulled into poverty.
- Scrapping [it will lift 350,000 children out of poverty](#) and mean a further 800,000 will be in less deep poverty.
- It would require an investment of £2 billion, compared to the annual cost of child poverty of £40 billion.
- The Work and Pensions Committee [recommended it be scrapped](#) in 2019, as it is ineffective, inefficient and potentially discriminatory. As have organisations such as the [IFS](#) and EPI.
- The [EPI has observed](#) the two child limit '... directly places increasing numbers of children in poverty; it does not appear to impact family planning decisions to any substantial extent; and it penalises not only those who have new babies after its introduction, but those whose financial situations worsen for reasons beyond their choice or control.'

b) Remove the benefit cap

- Getting rid of the benefit cap would mean that [about 300,000 children](#) would be living in less deep poverty.
- It has [a minimal effect on work incentives](#), while taking money away from the poorest families.
- It would require an investment of [£0.5 billion](#), compared to the annual cost of child poverty of £40 billion.

c) Restore adequacy to the benefits system more widely

- Beyond immediately scrapping the two-child limit and benefit cap, urgently restoring adequacy to benefits is vital for lifting and keeping families out of poverty.
- This includes uprating benefits by inflation each year and increasing the value of child benefit which has lost 20 per cent of its value since 2010. CPAG's [UC: a three step plan](#) breaks down the issues around universal credit's adequacy, functionality and relationship to work, and how these can be solved.

2. Alleviate income-related inequalities in school

'What's not always obvious is the families you would expect - [the cost of living] is impacting everyone, right across the socioeconomic groups. The policy is fantastic.' Teacher discussing London's universal primary FSM policy

Children spend a significant amount of their time in school. Schools should be designed to alleviate poverty and not exacerbate inequalities. They should foster a sense of belonging, free of stigma. School should be accessed universally without household income further jeopardising a child's education once they are inside the school gates.

As education policy is devolved, the following policies relate to the English education system, which currently lags behind devolved nations in many of these areas. However, governmental work on child poverty must look at how policy changes in England can support work taking place in the devolved nations.

Systemic inequalities must also be removed from the education system to create an environment where the following recommendations have the maximum impact so that all pupils can thrive. In England, the current system of curriculum, assessment and accountability can reinforce income-related inequalities. For example, schools with the least disadvantaged cohorts see [the biggest increases in Progress 8 scores](#), while those with the most disadvantaged cohorts see the biggest falls. The more FSM-eligible pupils in a school, [the less likely Ofsted](#) is to award it 'Outstanding'. The curriculum and assessment should be relevant to pupils, while the accountability system should consider schools' contexts and incentivise behaviours and practices that meet learners' needs and prevent off rolling and exclusions.

There are examples of excellent practice such as the University of Manchester's project, [Local Matters](#), which has supported schools to 'develop a strong understanding of local context through exploration of community and effective core practices within schools' curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to meet the needs of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.' Teachers reported improved attainment and engagement, including with problem-based activities.

These policy recommendations for schools must also be properly costed and sufficiently funded. Schools do not have the capacity or resources to deliver a child poverty package without significant investment.

'I think it's unfair that [before the UPFSM policy] some children had to pay and some didn't.' Special school pupil discussing London's universal primary FSM policy

Steps that must be taken:

- d) Invest in nutritious free school lunches for all pupils. Wipe school food debt alongside free school meals expansions, and in the meantime automatically enrol eligible pupils for free school meals.**
 - Means testing children for food creates stigma and puts pressures on schools. We don't means test other parts of the day, and yet good nutrition is vital for children to thrive.
 - Providing school food for all has numerous benefits to [health](#), [wellbeing](#), [prosperity](#) and the [economy](#).

- When provided universally, there is a [multiplier](#) effect to investment in school food. Compared with means-tested systems, all children benefit and the poorest children benefit the most, thereby reducing inequalities.
- Increasing numbers of local authorities have introduced auto- enrolment approaches, with great success. However, this approach leaves a post-code lottery with the onus largely remaining on families and schools to work out their eligibility. The Government should introduce a system to automatically enrol children for free school meals.
- [School meals debt](#) damages relationships between schools and families. No child should be in debt because they are hungry, and all school food debts should be wiped.

e) Sufficiently fund schools to provide before and after school activities for all pupils

- The Government's plans for breakfast clubs are welcome. They must be adequately funded to ensure clubs are properly staffed, provide good nutrition and are accessible to lower-income families. Clubs cannot be provided by the stretching of existing staff, who must have their hours and conditions protected. Provision for school settings other than primary schools should also be explored and invested in.
- Children in receipt of free school meals are currently less likely than their peers to take part in extra-curricular clubs at school. [The Education Policy Institute](#) found that children eligible for free school meals are 11 per cent less likely to attend sports clubs than their peers and 9 per cent less likely to attend clubs for hobbies, arts or music. Cost should not be a barrier to children taking part in before and after school activities.
- [CPAG and Magic Breakfast analysis](#) shows that free before- and after-school provision during term time could result in a low-income lone parent with two children being £1,200 better off annually, through the removal of childcare costs alone.

f) Update the Behaviour in Schools guidance so that children are not sanctioned for income-related issues

- [DfE data](#) shows that children in receipt of free school meals are four times as likely as their peers to be suspended from school.
- [Research from the DfE](#) on school uniform also shows that children from households facing financial hardship are much more likely to report that their child has been sent home from school because they did not have the right uniform. These are clear examples of income-related barriers that prevent children attending school and must be addressed.

g) Abolish attendance-related fines for families

- Fines are not a punishment for those who can afford to pay. [Educators believe](#) fines to be less effective than more supportive and engaging methods to improve attendance. Fines damage the relationship between a school and its families.
- The total number of [fines issued in 2022-23](#) was 20 per cent higher than in 2018-19. This equates to a fine for one in every 20 pupils aged between five and 16 at state schools. There is no sign that increases in the rate of fines have resulted in improving attendance rates.

3. Removing barriers to education and reducing the cost of the school day

'As a school, we do not have the funds to pay for our children's school trips and neither do a lot of our parents. This results in either avoiding booking trips and other enrichment activities or certain children missing out.' Teacher, NEU State of Education 2023

'There are an increasing number of pupils and their large families living in temporary accommodation i.e. hotel rooms with no cooking facilities, no internet, no washing facilities and often very far from their school, requiring them to catch two buses to school. These families have been in these hotels for several months, eating takeaway every night... paying for bus passes.' Teacher, NEU State of Education 2023

There are numerous financial barriers to accessing education which are most acutely felt by the least well-off families. Research shows that the [minimum cost of going to school](#) in the UK is £1003.63 for primary-aged children and £2274.77 for secondary school children. [Cost of the School Day research](#) with families found that one in 10 families feel the costs their school expects them to pay are unreasonable. This increases to one in five in families where children receive FSMs. Nearly half (46 per cent) of all families with children receiving FSMs reported that it is difficult for them to afford all the things their child needs for school.

Schools can play a part in removing these barriers, but they need to be adequately funded. The National Funding Formula [has caused a redistribution of money](#) away from the most disadvantaged communities. Meanwhile, [42 per cent of young people](#) do not have either broadband or a computer. The NFF should be sufficient enough to enable schools to ensure all children have the facilities and equipment they need to participate and thrive, and readjusted to make sure schools that are most deprived get the funding they need.

These barriers exacerbate attainment gaps and societal inequalities. A truly comprehensive education system should not include any prohibitive costs to children and families participating.

'They should make trips cheaper. In year 4 it's a lot of money. My mum ended up borrowing money from my aunt to pay for my trip.' Year 4 pupil

'I want to learn guitar in this school but I can't because my mum has a little bit of money.' Year 2 pupil

'If I'd known how much it would cost to do Food Tech, it would have affected my decision... it makes me not want to do the subject.' Year 10 pupil

Steps that must be taken:

h) The statutory uniform guidance should be tightened to limit costs of uniforms. Grants should be available for families who are struggling to buy uniforms

- Parents' biggest school cost worry is uniform, with [47 per cent of parents](#) saying it is of particular concern to them. Primary parents are paying [at minimum £311.24](#) per year for uniform, and secondary parents are paying a minimum of £449.68 per year.
- In its 2024 State of Education Survey, three in five teachers told the NEU that they see pupils coming to school in unclean, damaged or ill-fitting clothing and shoes. 80 per cent said their school now helps with uniform for disadvantage pupils.

- In CPAG in Scotland research with over 5000 pupils, around [90 per cent agreed](#) that school uniform is the school cost that matters most when it's unaffordable.

i) Review and reform the current Charging for School Activities guidance. No child should have to pay to take part in subjects at school and curriculum-related trips and activities

- Those experiencing poverty [are financially excluded](#) from full participation in a wide range of school subjects and activities.
- [The Education Policy Institute](#) found that as well as an attainment gap, lower income pupils face a participation gap. Pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are 39 per cent less likely than their peers to take music at GCSE in part due to the cost of instrument tuition. They are 49 per cent less likely to take PE which is partially linked to the cost of equipment and extra-curricular sports coaching.
- Other subjects such as or food education also have cost barriers. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, [three-quarters of teachers](#) reported that some pupils are asked to supply ingredients (and two-fifths of teachers reported that all pupils in their school are asked to supply ingredients). In these schools, two-thirds of pupils who are entitled to free-school meals are required to do so.
- Squeezed school budgets can lead to [families being pressurised](#) into making 'voluntary' payments for trips and visits.

j) Invest in public transport so children do not have to pay to get to school

- In London, children under 16 can travel on buses and trams for free. The Government should invest in the rest of the country to support all young people to get to school.
- An [education select committee inquiry](#) into persistent absence found that transport costs were a barrier to children from lower-income families attending school.
- [Research with families](#) has shown that transport to and from school for secondary students costs a minimum of £390 per child per year.

k) From classroom to Cabinet, children and parent voices must be included in decision making and policies should be informed by children's rights

- [Pupil voice](#) has been demonstrated to be a powerful mechanism for change in schools. There is [evidence](#) that taking a rights-based approach to education and providing opportunities for pupils to input into decision-making helps to improve attainment, behaviour and pupil wellbeing.

Summary of evidence

Education should be interesting, enjoyable, challenging and, importantly, accessible. However, the current education system is widening gaps in outcomes between the poorest students and their wealthier peers across every metric and outcome. From early years through to A-levels, pupils from lower-income households achievement and progress is below that of their peers. These effects are not because children living in poverty have less ability, but because household income itself has a causal impact on children's time in school and educational outcomes.

Children from lower-income households have [lower levels of school attendance](#), are [more likely to be suspended or excluded](#), and are [more likely to experience mental health issues](#) than their peers. [Poverty also has an impact on belonging and inclusion](#), with pupils in receipt of FSM being less likely to report feeling safe at school and more likely to report that they have been the victim of bullying or to spend time playing alone. In order for the Government's ambitions to break down barriers to opportunity, improve the life chances of children, and grow the economy to be realised, child poverty and the pervasive impact it has on children, families and our education system must be addressed.

It must also be considered that poverty does not affect all communities equally. The majority ([51 per cent](#)) of Black children in the UK are growing up in poverty, compared with 24 per cent of white British children. 42 per cent of pupils with SEN and an EHC plan are eligible for free school meals, compared with 24.6 per cent on average. Looked after children and young carers are also more likely to be growing up in poverty. Specific attention should be given to communities more likely to be affected by poverty.

This briefing sets out what could be achieved, and what the English school system could look like if child poverty was eradicated and the barriers to learning that too many young people currently face were addressed. Drawing on research and evidence from organisations across the education sector, alongside feedback from educators, parents and children, this briefing details what is needed to build a more inclusive education system. It also draws on the work being undertaken in other UK nations to tackle child poverty and shines a spotlight on the way that education policy in England is currently lagging behind when it comes to tackling child poverty both inside and outside of the school gates.

Across the UK, educators are working tirelessly in the face of poverty to support all children to reach their potential. But schools can only do so much. Any solutions to poverty and its impact on education must begin by increasing family incomes, with scrapping the two-child limit as an immediate priority. Schools must also be designed to alleviate poverty, not exacerbate it. Expanding free school meal provision and automatically enrolling families will help to reduce inequalities in education. Further barriers to education must also be removed including reducing the cost of the school day for families. Only then will all children be able to thrive at school.

About us

Child Poverty Action Group 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.

The Cost of the School Day project aims to reduce the financial barriers that prevent pupils from fully participating in the school day. Our approach involves working with whole-school communities (pupils, parents, teachers and staff) to identify and reduce cost barriers faced by pupils from low-income backgrounds. cpag.org.uk/cosd

The National Education Union (NEU) brings together the voices of 500,000 teachers, lecturers, support staff and leaders working in maintained and independent schools and colleges across the UK, to form the largest education union in Europe.