



Teach First

Building a fairer future

Tackling the attainment gap
in GCSE English and maths



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About Teach First

Teach First is an education charity with a mission to build a fair education for all. The charity believes that an excellent education is the best pathway to ensure that every young person can fulfil their potential and pursue their ambitions.

By recruiting, training and placing excellent teachers, as well as offering a range of school leadership programmes, the charity supports schools facing the biggest challenges to achieve that goal.

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Introduction

Ahead of GCSE results day, Teach First has released a new analysis of the ongoing attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils in GCSE English and maths.

The charity is calling for a significant increase in long-term funding for schools with the most disadvantaged intakes to address this gap, which is likely to have been worsened by partial school closures brought about by COVID-19. The charity is also calling for financial incentives for early career teachers who work in schools facing the greatest challenges.

The analysis highlights regional inequalities, with London continuing to dominate the top grades compared with the rest of the country. It also shows that both the capital and all regions across England are still struggling to close the attainment gap.

Why the attainment gap matters

GCSEs are vital qualifications for every young person. Research has shown that young people who get five good GCSEs are ten times more likely to achieve a degree-level qualification than those who do not.

Furthermore, if a student misses an English GCSE pass grade by just a single mark, their chances of dropping out of education before they are 18 increases by a third. Without five good GCSEs, a young person loses out on an average of £100,000 in earnings over their lifetime.¹

As this Teach First analysis shows, millions of disadvantaged young people are finishing school without the grades they need to open doors to the world; doors that open more freely for their wealthier peers.



What the figures say

In order to highlight the continued inequality in GCSE attainment, Teach First analysed data from the last three years to show how many disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged young people achieved standard passes (9-4)² in English and maths, broken down by region.

Nationally, Teach First found that, in 2019, just 45% of disadvantaged pupils achieved a standard pass in GCSE English and maths, compared with 72% of non-disadvantaged pupils – a stark attainment gap. The equivalent figures from 2018 and 2017 reveal that no progress has been made in closing the GCSE attainment gap in the last three years, with both figures remaining the same.

The analysis also highlights the ongoing attainment gap within – and between – regions across the country. In 2019, 59% of disadvantaged pupils achieved passes

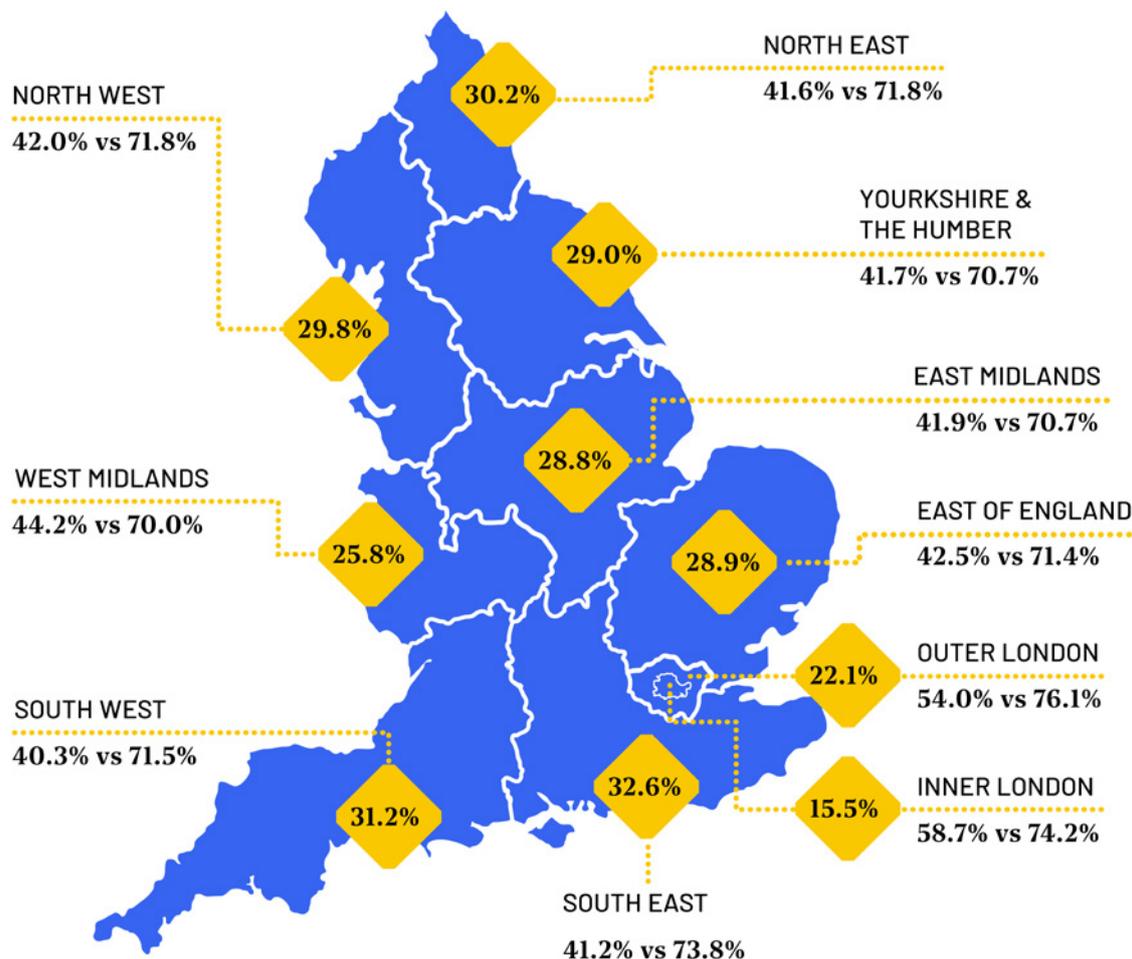
in English and maths GCSEs in Inner London, compared to 74% of non-disadvantaged pupils. In Outer London, the figures are 54% and 76% respectively.

“No progress has been made in closing the GCSE attainment gap in the last three years.”

Despite these two regions having the highest pass rates for disadvantaged pupils in the country, the attainment gap remains significant. In Inner London, the situation has not improved at all since 2017, while in Outer London, the attainment gap has actually widened slightly. The pass rate for disadvantaged pupils in Outer London has remained at 54%, while the figure for non-disadvantaged pupils has increased from 75% in 2017 to 76% in 2019. There is a clear need to keep up the support for schools serving disadvantaged pupils in the capital.

THE ATTAINMENT GAP

DISADVANTAGED PUPILS ACHIEVING 9-4 IN ENGLISH AND MATHS COMPARED TO NON-DISADVANTAGED PUPILS ACROSS ENGLAND (2018/19)



The need for action is even more urgent across the eight other regions in England, where the attainment gap is larger still. The pass rate in GCSE English and maths for disadvantaged pupils is between 40% (South West) and 44% (West Midlands), with the figures for non-disadvantaged pupils ranging between 70% (West Midlands) and 74% (South East).

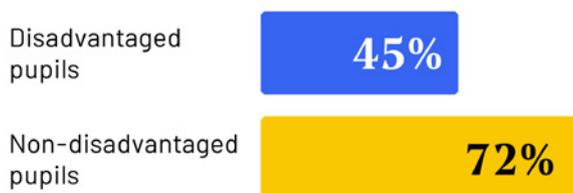
In five of the ten regions in England – North West, Outer London, South East, South West, and Yorkshire and the Humber – there is evidence that the attainment gap has widened slightly in the last few years, raising further concerns about the futures of thousands of young people nationally.

For example, in the South West – the area with the lowest pass rate for disadvantaged pupils in the country – just 40% of disadvantaged pupils achieved a pass grade in English and maths GCSE in 2019, which

is down from 41% in 2017. Meanwhile, the pass rate for non-disadvantaged pupils increased from 70% to 72%.

These statistics should alarm anyone concerned with the education and futures of disadvantaged young people in England. And, when you factor in the likely detrimental impact of COVID-19, this gap is something that needs to be urgently addressed.

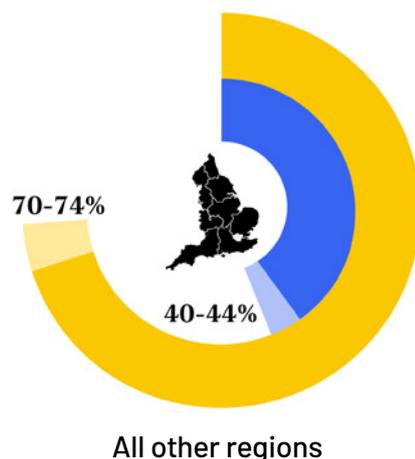
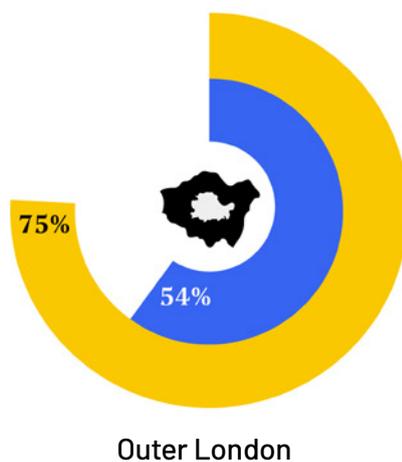
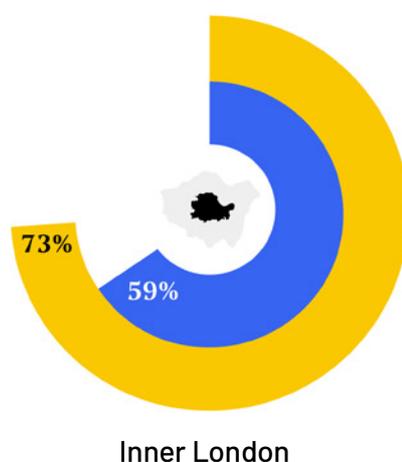
PUPILS ACHIEVING PASSES AT LEVELS 9-4 IN ENGLISH AND MATHS (2018/19)



IN 5 OF THE 10 REGIONS IN ENGLAND THE PERCENTAGE OF DISADVANTAGED PUPILS ACHIEVING A PASS GRADE IN GCSE ENGLISH AND MATHS HAS DROPPED SLIGHTLY SINCE 2017



PUPILS WHO ACHIEVED A PASS IN ENGLISH AND MATHS GCSE IN INNER LONDON COMPARED TO OUTER LONDON. THE ATTAINMENT GAP IS EVEN HIGHER ACROSS THE EIGHT OTHER REGIONS IN ENGLAND (2018/19)



NATIONAL AND REGIONAL GCSE ENGLISH AND MATHS PASS RATES FOR 2017-2019

	2018/19			2017/18			2016/17		
REGIONS	% all pupils achieving 9-4 Eng and maths	% disadv pupils achieving 9-4 Eng and maths	% non-disadv pupils achieving 9-4 Eng and maths	% all pupils achieving 9-4 Eng and maths	% disadv pupils achieving 9-4 Eng and maths	% non-disadv pupils achieving 9-4 Eng and maths	% all pupils achieving 9-4 Eng and maths	% disadv pupils achieving 9-4 Eng and maths	% non-disadv pupils achieving 9-4 Eng and maths
ENGLAND	64.9%	44.9%	72.1%	64.4%	44.6%	71.7%	64.2%	44.5%	71.5%
EAST MIDLANDS	63.8%	41.9%	70.7%	63.3%	40.8%	70.6%	63.1%	40.6%	70.2%
EAST OF ENGLAND	65.4%	42.5%	71.4%	65.3%	42.2%	71.6%	65.5%	42.6%	71.9%
INNER LONDON	66.5%	58.7%	74.2%	66.1%	58.7%	73.9%	66.1%	58.7%	74.5%
NORTH EAST	61.6%	41.6%	71.1%	62.2%	42.1%	71.4%	59.9%	38.9%	70.0%
NORTH WEST	62.9%	42.0%	71.8%	62.9%	42.5%	71.6%	62.7%	42.1%	71.6%
OUTER LONDON	69.8%	54.0%	76.1%	68.8%	53.5%	75.2%	68.9%	54.4%	75.1%
SOUTH EAST	67.5%	41.2%	73.8%	66.7%	40.7%	73.1%	66.5%	41.0%	72.9%
SOUTH WEST	65.0%	40.3%	71.5%	65.0%	41.9%	71.3%	64.1%	40.9%	70.3%
WEST MIDLANDS	62.3%	44.2%	70.0%	60.9%	42.8%	68.8%	61.2%	42.7%	69.5%
YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER	62.6%	41.7%	70.7%	62.4%	41.2%	70.6%	61.8%	41.2%	70.0%

The impact of COVID-19

The ongoing attainment gap in GCSE English and maths was already a major concern before COVID-19 struck. So the consequences of the partial school closures has only intensified the problem.

A Teach First survey conducted with Teacher Tapp in March 2020 revealed that just 2% of teachers working in the most disadvantaged schools believed that all their pupils had adequate access to digital devices to learn from home.³ This is four times less than teachers working in the most affluent schools (9%) and three times less than the national average (7%). Similarly, 25% of teachers working in the country's most disadvantaged schools (compared with 4% in the most affluent schools) believed that at least a fifth of their pupils did not have adequate access to a device for online learning at home.

Further evidence since then has shown the many ways disadvantaged pupils have had a far more difficult time during the pandemic than their better-off peers. For example, these pupils may have limited or no access to the internet, appropriate devices or dedicated study spaces.⁴

These inequalities add serious risks to building a fair education for all. The Education Endowment Foundation estimates that all progress towards narrowing the attainment gap over the last decade has been lost since the onset of COVID-19.⁵

Unless urgent action is taken to support the education of disadvantaged young people across the country, the GCSE attainment gap will widen further, leaving the futures of disadvantaged young people – and the country – at risk. Research shows that if young people choose to leave education when the economy is weak, it has a direct impact on their employment and pay for at least five years.⁶

If we invest in young people's education now, not only can we set them on a path to fulfilling careers, we can also avoid wasting the talent of this generation of young people by unblocking the talent pipeline. A pipeline which will become more important than ever as the country seeks to bounce back.



Proposed solutions

In response to COVID-19, the £1bn fund announced by the government in June 2020 will undoubtedly be a vital pool of financial support for schools in the year ahead as they work to support pupils who lost the most learning.

But the figures show that the ongoing attainment gap is a long-term problem in need of a long-term funding solution. This will be essential to prevent a reversal of the progress made in the last decade and to close the ongoing attainment gap.

Russell Hobby, CEO of Teach First, says: "This year, we saw many cases of unfairness in exam results, with pupils from disadvantaged areas more likely to be graded down. This is deeply unfair – and we want to see a swift and transparent appeals process so that young people are not denied the opportunities they have worked so hard for.

"However, this report lays bare that the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their better off peers is something we should be outraged at every year.

"This problem could be made worse by the pandemic – but to tackle it once and for all, we must direct increased long-term funding to schools serving disadvantaged communities so that their pupils and staff can thrive. And introduce a pay premium to

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incentivise teachers to work in the schools where they can make the biggest difference. Only then can we ensure that millions of young people across the country are not left out of the nation's recovery."

Increased funding for schools can improve the education of disadvantaged young people in a number of ways. Teach First has long made the case that great teachers make a decisive difference in the classroom, and schools need money to recruit, develop and retain those teachers. This includes financial incentives for early career teachers who work in schools facing the greatest challenges.



Case study

David Thomas, Headteacher of Jane Austen College in Norwich and a former Teach First trainee teacher, echoed Russell's remarks on the need for urgent action.

"It's hugely concerning that across England, disadvantaged children face worse futures because they're not able to achieve their full potential at school. The progress that's been made in closing the gap in London is cast iron evidence that your life doesn't have to be determined by your background, because it's much less determined by your background in the capital than it is elsewhere. We need to see the gap closed altogether in every corner of our country."

He added: "Now thanks to COVID-19, pupils have lost 10% of their time in secondary school – and we know that many of them weren't getting a good education through that period. So we should be shouting from the rooftops about this and taking urgent action."

David recognises that funding alone does not solve all of education's problems, but highlights the difference in his experience of teaching in Norwich and London as a clear example of the impact it can have.

"Educational inequality is not a problem you can solve just by throwing money at it. But my old school in central London had an intake of 180 children and we have the same number at my current school in Norwich.

"In London, we split that 180 into 10 classes because we could afford to have enough teachers to teach them in an average class size of 18. In Norwich, we can't afford to do that – they split up into six classes of 30. So the educational experience you get is very different.

"In Norwich, disadvantaged pupils on average get three fewer good GCSE grades than disadvantaged pupils in Westminster. Disadvantaged pupils in Norwich have only a fifth of the chance of going to a selective university as they do in Westminster, so the gap is huge – and we as a country need to do much more about improving the life chances of both."

Building a fair education for all requires investment, alongside sustained efforts from schools, universities and government – but the education system does not operate in a vacuum. Improving the life chances and career opportunities of disadvantaged young people will also take sustained investment in infrastructure for disadvantaged communities as a whole.



A recent report from the Social Mobility Commission⁷ revealed that moving to better-off areas such as London and the South East offers far better job prospects and higher pay. Those who move are more likely to have a degree, while those who stay put are less likely to secure higher managerial jobs and average significantly lower earnings.

David believes that increased investment in the infrastructure of whole communities could encourage more prospective teachers to stay in the areas where they are most needed.

"Lots of people who have been successful in their education move to London when they are in their early 20s. And that gives you a pool of highly-motivated, well-qualified people who are looking for opportunities and to make their mark on the world. But what it also means is that there are fewer of those people in other parts of the country at that moment in their lives.

"Many of those people may want to move back out to the area that they came from or to another area. I think we can be much more proactive in helping them do that and end up teaching in schools with disadvantaged intakes so that there are more great teachers coming into these schools."

Every area of the country has significant challenges when it comes to educational inequality. To close the ongoing attainment gap in GCSE English and maths, investment in the schools with the most disadvantaged intakes will play a significant part in ensuring that all young people have the opportunities they need to maximise their potential.

References

1. Impetus, [Research Briefing 9: The Impact of English and Maths](#), 2020
2. The Department for Education [define a “Standard Pass” as Grade 4 and above](#), which is the metric Teach First used for this analysis
3. Teach First, [Only 2% of teachers working in the most disadvantaged communities believe all their pupils have adequate access to devices for home learning](#), 2020
4. See for example: Sutton Trust, [Independent school pupils twice as likely to get online lessons every day](#), 2020 & YouGov, [At least 44% of teachers know pupils who can’t access education due to technology issues](#), 2020
5. Education Endowment Foundation, [Impact of school closures on the attainment gap: Rapid Evidence Assessment](#), 2020
6. Institute for Fiscal Studies, [Entering the labour market in a weak economy: scarring and insurance](#), 2017
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Building a fair education for all.

[teachfirst.org.uk](https://www.teachfirst.org.uk)

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