



## **POLICY BRIEF:**

# **CHILD POVERTY AND EDUCATION**

## **Introduction**

Children from lower socio-economic groups are at much greater disadvantage at every stage in their educational careers than those from higher socio-economic groups, and the gap is growing. What makes this so important is that educational attainment not only determines outcomes in later life but also the likelihood of escaping poverty. Poverty provides a context shaping educational outcomes, but schools play a role in reducing the impact of poverty.

Poverty drives educational inequality, so policy to improve all children's attainment must tackle poverty. The following National Public Service Agreements are relevant:

- Halve the number of children in poverty by 2010-11, on the way to eradicating child poverty by 2020 (PSA 9);
- Raise the educational achievement of all children and young people (PSA 10);
- Narrow the gap in educational achievement between children from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers (PSA 11).

These PSA's are mapped to the national indicator set through the *Enjoy and Achieve* indicators which cover both educational attainment and narrowing the gaps in achievement (NI 72- NI 109).

## **Key statistics<sup>1</sup>**

- By age three, being in poverty makes a difference equivalent to nine months' development in school readiness.
- During their years at school, children in receipt of free school meals (a key indicator of poverty) do progressively worse on average at school than their peers.

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<sup>1</sup> Figures in the briefing are from CPAG's recent publication, D Hirsch, *Chicken and Egg: child poverty and educational inequalities*, CPAG (2007).

- Children who do badly at primary school are less likely to improve at secondary school if they are poor.
- Children from poor families are more likely to have poor qualifications.
- Young people with parents in manual occupations are far less likely than others to go to university and only 1 in 6 of students at top universities come from lower socio-economic back-grounds.

## Progress

Although there has been good progress made in overall educational achievement levels among children over the last 10 years, children from poorer backgrounds still persistently under-perform compared to their more privileged peers:

- Children and families who would most benefit from high quality early childhood services are the least likely to access them.
- Among primary school children, the gap in attainment between children from poor backgrounds and their peers has narrowed only slightly
- 32.7% of children entitled to free school meals got five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C, just half the level of those not entitled to free school meals 60.7%.<sup>2</sup>
- There has however been good progress made in achievement at 19, with more than 70 per cent of people aged 19 in 2006 qualified to at least Level 2 (5 A-C GCSE equivalent).<sup>3</sup>

## Importance for local authorities

Central government is committed to raising the educational achievement of all children and young people and narrowing the gap in educational achievement between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers through national Public Service Agreements 10 and 11. To help achieve this, the national PSA delivery agreement notes expectations on Local Authorities including to:

- Introduce performance management arrangements for their Sure Start Children's Centres and ensure that they are monitored against clear targets, including how well they reach, and what outcomes they secure for, the most disadvantaged children.
- Focus on the quality of early years provision to ensure that they can set, and have in place to 'achieve, stretching targets for early years foundation stage profile outcomes'.
- Support schools, particularly through School Improvement Partners, in setting targets to secure the progression of all children. Particular attention should be given to vulnerable children such as children in care.

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<sup>2</sup> Department for Education and Skills, National Curriculum Assessment, GCSE and Equivalent Attainment and Post-16 Attainment by Pupil characteristics, in England, 2005/06, November 2006 at [www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk), table 8

<sup>3</sup> Opportunity for All, Department for Work and Pensions indicator 7 (children and young people). Data is for 2006

- Be more proactive in preventing school failure and to take 'swifter and more radical action where it occurs'.

In addition, the Government expects:

- Local areas, led by the Learning and Skills Council or the Local Authority, 'to decide together on how best to meet the needs of young people in the area through a combined offer which includes the full range of choice and setting on offer, a prospectus of all the courses on offer', together with the advice, information and guidance for young people that will suit them best.
- 'Local partnerships to make sure that they track and contact all young people so that each is offered a suitable course and supported to participate'. This, it says, is 'especially critical for those young people at risk of disengagement.'

The experience of poverty conditions children's success in school, but even with this effect, local authorities need to do all they can to improve children's chances of succeeding— that is a key way of reducing the long term impact of child poverty and preventing today's poor child become tomorrow's poor parent.

There is much work going on intended to increase participation and reduce the attainment gaps which persist in schools. Admissions policies are clearly important, to ensure social mix, but within that there is a need to monitor how children from different backgrounds fare.

One key lever that education authorities have is influencing access to opportunities such as after school or extra curricula activities and we urge policy makers to poverty proof education policy (the child poverty proofing tool should help this process to ensure equal access to services and charging policies (for instance for meals, uniforms, trips and activities) do not prevent poorer children accessing opportunities.