

# Social inequality proved to impact educational performance in UK

Tania Kent

31 August 2011

Two newly released studies have reaffirmed that poverty is the most significant barrier in educational achievement.

Growing numbers of disadvantaged children are leaving primary school unable to master the basics of reading, writing and maths.

Education Endowment Fund (EEF) research revealed that while 45 percent of children had reached the already low minimum government-stipulated standard in SATs exams three years ago, this has fallen to 40 percent.

The gap between children from poorer and better-off families is widening dramatically. Three out of every five poorer children from “under-performing” category schools will have difficulty in mastering the basics as they start secondary school, at age 11 years.

The gap then widens at secondary school. There, poor children are a third as likely to reach the minimum standard as their better-off peers (18 percent compared with 61 percent). In comparison, in primary schools they are half as likely to reach minimum standards (40 percent compared to 81 percent).

The education editor of the *Independent* commented that the study’s findings are “the first concrete sign that, while standards among better-off children are rising, those at the bottom of the pile are in more danger of becoming a lost generation once they leave school.”

Statistics released by the Sutton Trust, who run the EEF, show that disadvantaged children are increasingly faced with being excluded from school. The statistics are from schools and exclusion appeals in England during 2009/10.

The key points from the latest release are:

- There were an estimated 5,740 permanent

exclusions from primary, secondary and all special schools in 2009/10.

- In 2009/10 there were 279,260 fixed period exclusions from state funded secondary schools, 37,210 fixed-period exclusions from primary schools and 14,910 fixed-period exclusions from special schools.

- The average length of a fixed period exclusion in state funded secondary schools was 2.5 days, for primary schools the average length of a fixed period exclusion was 2.1 days.

- The permanent exclusion rate for boys was approximately four times higher than for girls. The fixed period exclusion rate for boys was almost three times higher than that for girls.

- Pupils with Special Educational Needs with statements are around 8 times more likely to be permanently excluded than those pupils with no SEN.

- Children who are eligible for free school meals, which is determined by income, are around four times more likely to receive a permanent exclusion and three times more likely to receive a fixed period exclusion than children who are not eligible for free school meals.

Pupils on free school meals are 55 times less likely to go to Cambridge or Oxford than those from private schools, the Sutton Trust has said. The proportion was 0.8 percent at both Oxford and Cambridge, while more than 40 percent of their students came from independent schools.

The charity said it feared rising fees and the axing of support programmes would make it harder for poor students to get into England’s top universities. In general, pupils from private schools were 22 times more likely to go to a top university than those who had been on free school meals, the Trust said.

Another study released at the same time by the British Educational Research Association established

that schools are unlikely to be able to close the achievement gap between pupils from rich and poor backgrounds.

When Labour came into office in 1997 under Tony Blair, it pledged that education would be its number one priority and that it would eradicate child poverty within 20 years. Rather than achieving its targets, child poverty and the two-tier education system remain firmly entrenched. Government “efforts” to bridge the social divide in education have been ineffective and will continue to remain so if broader social problems such as unemployment, housing and health are not tackled, the report states.

Previous attempts to narrow the gap have not made “substantial sustained improvements.” While the association supports increased funding to education to tackle social exclusion, it concludes that schools have struggled to break the link between a poor background and low academic achievement.

“Neither general nor targeted interventions have, thus far, demonstrated substantial sustained improvements that can be spread more widely across the stock of schools,” says the review, titled, “Social Inequality: Can Schools Narrow the Gap?”

Mel West, co-editor of the review and head of Manchester University’s school of education, says that schools in isolation are not going to be able to achieve a more equal outcome for pupils.

“It’s possible for schools to play a role, but there needs to be parallel strategies in health, housing and employment,” says Professor West. Otherwise, the best efforts of schools are going to be insufficient to counter the other problems facing pupils and families in their home background.

If pupils are in families that are struggling with unemployment, bad housing and poor health, the ability of schools to close the gap with more affluent children is going to be limited. Schools cannot provide a “panacea” for politicians trying to address broader social ills, he stated.

The increase in competition between schools, including the use of league tables, has not helped to narrow the gap between the educational experiences of rich and poor. “Twenty years of competition between schools has done little to improve the lot of disadvantaged pupils,” West says.

The billions of austerity cuts now being imposed will

impact on all areas of the lives of millions of people and only increase the social divide. Worsening poverty and deprivation will mean that a good quality education will be the exclusive province of the rich and better off sections of the middle class.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**