

Report demolishes government claims that reopening UK schools reflects concern for disadvantaged children

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Since the reckless reopening of the UK economy from the beginning of July and all schools at the beginning of September, the number of coronavirus cases has escalated out of control.

Weekly figures show a doubling of new infections, directly related to the premature lifting of lockdown before the virus was sufficiently suppressed and adequate public health measures put in place.

As early as May, Boris Johnson's Conservative government—backed by the Labour Party and the unions—insisted schools be reopened so parents could return to work. Health Secretary Gavin Williamson dismissed the safety concerns and opposition of parents, educators and doctors as “scaremongering,” claiming the government had the best interests of children at heart.

Such nonsense is belied by a damning report by the Social Mobility Commission (SMC), “The Long Shadow of Deprivation: Differences in Opportunity across England.” The SMC is an advisory public body sponsored by the Department of Education. Its remit is to monitor and encourage ways to achieve social mobility in the UK.

Published as schools began reopening their gates, its findings confirm what has long been known—that inequality in educational outcomes is directly related to economic deprivation, over which successive governments have presided. The inequality persists and widens post-education, with children from poorer backgrounds in general earning less than their peers with the same educational qualifications.

Williamson said, “We recognise that children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are the ones that are going to suffer the most if we do not bring schools back when we are able to do so.”

The recent A-level assessment scandal, which forced the government into a U-turn with an apology, exposed this hogwash. The exams were cancelled due to the pandemic, and rather than base this year's grades on teacher

assessments, an algorithm was used which favoured children from better off areas. Almost 40 percent of pupils' grades were downgraded, revealing that the awards were based on social class, not merit. Pupils attending private schools saw their grades rise.

The education of poorer children is of as little concern for the Johnson government as the health of the working class. And neither was it for the last Labour government led by Tony Blair and then Gordon Brown.

Since the 2008 banking crash, education and social welfare suffered draconian cuts to shore up the profits of the mega-rich. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, total spending per pupil in England fell by 8 percent in real terms in 2009–10 and 2019–20. The number of children living in relative poverty has soared by 600,000 since 2012, according to the SMC, which projects an “increase to 5.2 million by 2022.” Black children and children from ethnic minorities are among the most deprived.

The data collected for the SMC report related to young men attending state schools, born in the period 1986–1988, with a view to examining trends in earnings by age 28, in 2014–2016. Young men were the chosen cohort because women would have gaps in employment due to maternity leave.

The report notes “sons from affluent families still typically achieve higher GCSE [secondary school exam] results than sons from deprived families … [they] perform significantly better than those from the most deprived families, scoring on average 41 percentiles higher in the age 16 (GCSE) test score distribution.”

The study found variations between different local authorities. In Manchester the difference in educational outcomes was found to be 37 percentiles, compared with 48 in nearby Trafford.

Local authorities with the largest gaps in educational outcomes between rich and poor sons were found to have a difference of over 50 percentiles in the GCSE exams. The

gap was twice that in authorities with the smallest gaps.

Explaining these variations in the general trend the report cites, “Local authorities with large educational inequalities tend to have greater school segregation in terms of both achievement and socio-economic status. ... They are also more likely to have grammar schools [selective with an entrance exam passed with the aid of private tuition]. Seven of the 10 local authorities with the largest education gaps have grammar schools.”

As its name suggests, the SMC is more concerned with how educational achievement impacts on job prospects, earnings and social mobility. The section of the report, “Education, Education, Education?”—referencing the mantra of the Blair Labour government—examines data comparing the earnings of the sons from affluent parents with those with the same qualifications from deprived backgrounds.

Education was promoted by Blair and Brown as a way out of poverty and the key to social mobility. But under them, the previous Conservative government’s regime of rigorous testing in primary schools continued, along with the proscriptive National Curriculum and privatisation of education continued. It was the Blair government that launched Academy schools (publicly funded, privately run) in the inner cities in 2000, supposedly to drive up standards and replace failing schools.

New Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer is repackaging Blair’s mantra with the slogan “Close the gap”—calling on the Johnson government to guarantee no child will be left behind due to COVID-19. Studies show the attainment gap has widened since the pandemic.

The report deliberately doesn’t use the word class, but its findings show that class differences persist when children enter the jobs market. The report’s key findings highlight, “Where you grow up matters—social mobility in England is a postcode lottery, with large differences across areas in both the adult pay of disadvantaged sons and the size of the pay gap for sons from deprived families, relative to those from affluent families.”

In areas with the highest social mobility, 28-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds earned twice as much (over £20,000 more) as their disadvantaged counterparts in areas with the lowest social mobility. In parts of London and more affluent areas, pay inequalities between children from affluent and poorer backgrounds—with the same educational qualifications—almost disappear, according to the report. Areas with the lowest social mobility had the largest pay gaps, 2.5 times bigger, between the children from affluent parents and those from poor families than areas of high social mobility—when comparing those with comparable qualifications.

Areas with low social mobility—the report singles out

Bolton, Bradford, Chiltern, Hyndburn and Thanet—“typically have fewer professional and managerial occupations, fewer ‘Outstanding’ schools, more areas of deprivation.”

Middlesbrough, Liverpool, Knowsley, Kingston upon Hull and Manchester were the local authorities with the highest proportions of neighbourhoods classed as the most deprived in England. Of the Local Authorities in the study, one in six were found to have low pay for sons from poor families as well as large pay differentials between those from affluent and deprived backgrounds equally qualified.

The report offers the following explanation: “State schools in deprived areas may have fewer resources to spend on enrichment and career development activities for their pupils, leaving them relatively ill equipped to enter the labour market. Sons from deprived backgrounds may lack the financial capital available to more affluent sons to explore various job opportunities in the early stage of their career ... [with] parental financial backing [allowing them] to pursue unpaid or low-paid internships. Higher costs may also deter people from less advantaged backgrounds from moving to seek good opportunities elsewhere.”

Also, sons from richer families will have “better social networks.”

The report offers no solution to the inequality it exposes, except a vain plea for the Tories to “consider what support can be targeted on these local authorities to improve overall social mobility outcomes.”

Parents, educators and students should join the fight against the unsafe reopening of schools, colleges and universities. To participate in the next meeting of the newly founded Educators Rank-and-File Committee, this Saturday, September 26 at 2 p.m. click here.



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