A major weakness of the UK education system is the long tail of poorly performing schools and pupils, a new election briefing from the Centre for Economic Performance, LSE, said today.

The report says that politicians who are serious about addressing social mobility need to do more for the ‘forgotten third’ of young people who fail to get good GCSEs.

And it adds that austerity has caused school expenditure to fall dramatically – which is likely to have had detrimental effects on learning.

“Changes in school expenditure have a substantial impact on pupil achievement, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds,” Sandra McNally, joint author of the report and director of the Education and Skills group at CEP, said.

The report estimates that a 30 per cent increase in average expenditure per pupil (over four years) would reduce the gap between the UK and the top performer in the PISA (2015) international rankings by more than a third – and if this increase was spent on disadvantaged pupils it would almost eliminate the attainment gap between those pupils eligible for free school meals and other pupils.

The report concludes that some education policies proposed by political parties are unlikely to benefit educational outcomes - these include: further structural change (such as more ‘academisation’ or more free schools), an extension of early years provision with no change in quality and the abolition of tuition fees in higher education. “These policies may be desirable (at least for some groups) for other reasons,” Professor McNally added. “But if funding was instead put into general school expenditure and improving teacher quality we would be likely to see positive effects on student outcomes.”

The report shows:

On early years

- To date, expansions of early years provision have not been very successful in improving children’s subsequent educational outcomes. As this policy also has fairly small effects on labour supply, this policy is primarily a financial transfer to working families.

On schools

- A major weakness in the UK is the long tail of poorly performing schools and pupils, where the UK does not perform well relative to other countries, especially on basic skills.
Large-scale structural reform – converting schools into academies – has not been successful for the most part in improving educational outcomes. The focus needs to be on recruitment and retention of high quality teachers.

The few people who attend private schools have a significant advantage in school examinations, in the probability of attending university and in the labour market.

On further and higher education

A third of young people do not get good GCSEs and often languish in the education system and the labour market. They are in danger of being forgotten in the election debate.

Whether apprenticeships are a good investment depends on the type of apprenticeship on offer and whether they are directed at younger or older people. The debate on employer investment in skills needs to be widened beyond use of the apprenticeship levy.

The increase in university tuition fees does not appear to have discouraged full-time enrolments. The recent Augar review has much to say about the financing of higher education. Whether political parties will engage with the detail remains to be seen.

Jo Blanden, reader in economics at the University of Surrey and a research associate at CEP, said an increased focus on quality was needed in early years.

“The evidence shows that policies to expand provision of free childcare have eased family finances for working parents but have not been very successful in improving children’s educational outcomes,” Dr Blanden said. “To have effects on children’s educational outcomes, there would need to be a focus on the quality of provision, which would require substantial investment.”

Gill Wyness, senior lecturer at the UCL Institute of Education and a research associate at CEP, said: “A policy of low, or no, tuition fees for higher education would disproportionately benefit those who go on to higher-paying jobs.

“The broader context is that individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to enter university at all, and in particular are less likely to attend Russell Group universities. This is mainly explained by their GCSE and A-level results. The level of tuition fees is immaterial for these individuals.”

The full report CEP Election Analysis 2019: Education and Skills is available here: Education and Skills

Notes for editors:

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CEP election analysis: Education and Skills is one in a series of election briefings produced by the Centre for Economic Performance, LSE. The series aims to provide an impartial, evidence-based analysis of the key issues in the 2019 UK general election including Brexit, social mobility, immigration, the labour market and regional policy.

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