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CEP Election Analysis 2024: Schools

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Executive summary

- Since the pandemic, there has been declining educational achievement, increasing absence from school and worsening mental health among school-age children. Educational inequalities have widened.
- Poorer education outcomes have disastrous longer-term consequences both for children and for society as a whole. There is a strong relationship between cognitive skills and economic growth.
- Teachers are the most important school resource. But there are big problems of recruitment and retention likely deriving from relatively low teacher pay and a higher workload than in many other countries.
- There are some promising low-cost policies that may help to address current challenges, including for example schemes recruiting undergraduates as tutors that have led many to consider a teaching career.
- The bottom line however is that schools in England, and the UK as a whole, need greater investment. Failure to do so puts economic growth in jeopardy as well as worsening social mobility.

Post-pandemic problems in attendance, attainment and skills

The UK's school system faces first order challenges in the post-pandemic era: classrooms that are missing many children on a regular basis and are devoid of a steady supply of high-quality teachers are always going to fall short as places of learning. Compared with addressing these education basics, everything else is a secondary concern.

The reverberations from the unprecedented disruption to schooling during Covid-19 continue to be felt by cohorts of school-age children whether it is declining educational achievement, increasing absence from school or worsening mental health. [Elliot Major et al \(2024a\)](#) document the problems of a generation at risk. Their review of international evidence suggests that children suffered significant Covid learning loss of up to six months and a significant decline in socio-emotional skills. The pandemic may be over, but the problems persist and are predicted to affect educational progress well into the future, amid rising levels of child poverty. While the UK might have done relatively well in the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) tests compared to other countries (though there are some doubts about this due to sampling practices), maths and reading scores for 15-year-olds have declined and are at their lowest since 2006.

Aside from educational attainment, there is also a national crisis in persistent school absence. Figures for England show that in 2017/18, 11.7% of pupils missed 10 or more sessions (defined as half a day of school); in 2021/22, this had increased to 23.5% of pupils missing 10 or more sessions ([Elliot Major et al, 2024b](#)). Mounting evidence demonstrates a negative effect of school absence on educational attainment ([Cattan et al, 2023](#)) for primary schools in Sweden and [Liu et al, \(2021\)](#) for secondary schools in California). Unsurprisingly, missing out on school leads to lower grades.

Not only has there been a decline in overall educational attainment but there is a gap between pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds. Even before the pandemic, this was a long-term problem. For example, [Farquharson et al, \(2022\)](#) show that there had been virtually no change in the “disadvantage gap” in GCSE attainment over 20 years up to 2019. The gap has become worse since the pandemic. [Elliot Major et al, \(2024a\)](#) predict that this gap will persist for several years following the pandemic and summarise a series of national studies demonstrating that starker socio-economic gaps are a defining characteristic of the post-pandemic era – see the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Socio-economic achievement gaps in England

Study/measure	Socio-economic measure	Size of gap
GCSE attainment at age 15/16, 2022/23 (DfE)	Free school meals entitlement versus non-FSM	3.94 (On the key stage 4 disadvantage gap index. This is the widest gap in a decade)
Age 5 expected levels in the early learning goals, 2022/23 (DfE)	Free school meals entitlement versus non-FSM	20.2 percentage points (49.7% versus 69.9%)
OECD maths score at age 15 (2022)	Index of economic, social and cultural status	86 points between top and bottom 25% of status (similar to gap in 2015/18)
NFER reading tests for Year 3 and Year 4 pupils (2023)	Free school meals entitlement versus non-FSM	7 months' progress
EPI reading tests in primary school (2023)	Primary schools with high and low levels of disadvantage	12.3 months of learning (11.7 months before lockdown)

Source: Taken from [Elliot Major et al \(2024a\)](#).

Poorer education outcomes have disastrous longer-term consequences both for children (for example, being paid less and making slower career progress) and for society as a whole. Analysis by [Hanushek and Woessmann \(2021\)](#) suggests that “knowledge capital” (defined as the aggregate cognitive skills of the population), can account for three-quarters of the variation across countries in long-term economic growth rates. Lower skills mean less productive economies.

Teacher troubles: recruitment and retention

Equally troubling are growing concerns over the recruitment and retention of teachers. In 2022/23, initial teacher training numbers fell significantly below target – by nearly 30% (McLean et al, 2023). Even more worrying, the number of teachers considering leaving the teaching profession has increased in recent years. According to a 2023 survey “Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders” (WLTL), 36% of teachers said they were considering leaving the state school sector in the next 12 months (for reasons other than retirement). This is a significant increase from 2022, when the figure was 25%. ([DfE, 2024](#)).

Teachers are the most important school resource. This may be self-evident to most people, but is also well-attested in empirical studies. As discussed by [Hanushek \(2011\)](#), the differences are large, with some teachers producing a year and a half of gain in achievement in an academic year while others with equivalent pupils produce only half a year of gain. Two pupils starting at the same level can know vastly different amounts at the end of a single academic year due solely to the teacher to which they are assigned. Unfortunately,

we have yet to find a reliable way of predicting teacher quality; there is no silver policy bullet for ensuring highly effective teaching across all classrooms.

Higher teacher turnover is not good for pupil learning: [Gibbons, Scrutinio and Telhaj \(2021\)](#) find that pupils in the final year of their compulsory secondary education in England score less well in their final assessment if they are exposed to higher rates of teacher turnover in the subjects they are studying.

Likely drivers behind problems of recruitment and retention are teachers' pay and workload. According to the WLTL survey, 63% of teachers surveyed list pay as one of the main reasons for considering leaving education within the next 12 months ([DfE, 2024](#)). Indeed between 2010/11 and 2021/22, teachers' pay increases were below inflation (with a pay freeze between 2010/11 and 2012/13). Over this period, the wage gap has widened between teachers and average earners, making the profession less attractive.

High workload is another key factor that drives teachers out of the profession. In the 2023 WLTL survey, 94% of teachers surveyed listed the high workload as the main reason for leaving education ([DfE, 2024](#)). [McLean et al \(2023\)](#) also report that working hours for full-time teachers are higher than those of similar graduates in other occupations. They also work longer than the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average: full-time lower secondary teachers in England report working on average 49.3 hours a week compared with an OECD average of 41 hours, while full-time primary teachers in England report working 52.1 hours per week, higher than any participating country in the survey, apart from Japan (OECD TALIS Survey). According to a [survey of National Education Union members](#) in 2024, 41% of teachers described their workload as "unmanageable", and 37% only just manageable.

Policy priorities: Invest or suffer the long-term consequences

The message for politicians is unequivocal: to tackle the problems faced by schools in England and the UK as a whole, more investment is needed. In education, money matters. Improving children's outcomes requires investment in their education and skills (their "human capital"). Failure to do so puts their educational attainment and our economic growth at risk. While schools and parents might be able to offset some decline in school expenditure through compensatory behaviour, it is doubtful they can do that over the long term. [Gibbons et al. \(2018\)](#) show a strong effect of large cross-sectional differences in school funding in England (brought about because of differences in funding formulae between

areas). The estimates suggest that an increase of £1,000 per pupil per year in primary school is associated with approximately four months of extra progress for a pupil on average. A funding increase of this order of magnitude would be needed to restore the average level of achievement at the end of primary school back to its pre-pandemic levels.

Unfortunately, school budgets have suffered from austerity over many years. The latest annual review of education expenditure by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) ([Drayton et al. 2023](#)) shows that school spending per pupil in England fell by 9% in real terms between 2009/10 and 2019/20. Recent funding increases are projected to restore spending to 2010 levels after accounting for inflation. But against this, they estimate that the purchasing power of school budgets in 2024 will still be about 4% lower than in 2010 because of rising school costs.

Building up human capital is also essential for economic growth, and this requires sustained investment at all levels (just like physical capital). Failure to invest risks economic growth in the future as well as worsening social mobility (as children from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to benefit more from general investment in education – see [Gibbons and McNally, 2013](#)).

As the most important “school input”, increasing teachers’ pay and reducing the workload are central to making the teaching profession more competitive with other graduate professions. Although the government has introduced several policies in the recent years aiming to improve teacher recruitment and retention, these policies are targeted at early career teachers (eg increasing the starting salary) rather than to more experienced teachers. Exploring ways to improve teachers’ terms and conditions is a crucial area for policy.

There are some promising low-cost policies that would help to improve teacher recruitment and thereby pupil achievement. A pilot programme using trained undergraduate tutors to provide academic and mentoring support to help boost the foundational skills of pupils for example has led to many going on to consider a teaching career for example ([Elliot Major et al, 2024a](#)). The study authors also suggest a dedicated research programme to develop evidence-informed approaches to school-parent partnerships to improve pupil attendance, and rebalancing Ofsted inspections to explicitly consider disadvantage in schools and credit those excelling when serving under-resourced communities.

Extra funds provided through the government’s Pupil Premium (PP) grant meanwhile, totalling £2.5bn in 2022/23, rightly recognise the additional resources required for under-

resourced pupils. But a review is now needed to assess whether PP funds are effectively distributed and deployed in schools. The problem is that PP money is increasingly used to fill budget holes elsewhere. The bottom line is that our schools need greater investment; failure to deliver on this will just store up greater problems for the future.

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