

COVID-19 recovery: reducing the impact of COVID-19 school closures on disadvantaged pupils

This document covers:

- catch-up funding: allocation, use of and scrutiny
- assessing strategic priorities in light of COVID-19
- considering the pupil premium strategy
- questions to ask school leaders

The government classifies a pupil as 'disadvantaged' if they have been eligible for free school meals in the last six years or if they have been in care or adopted from care. These are the children and young people we are considering in this document.

Despite the best efforts of schools to provide continuity of education for all pupils during lockdown, there is no doubt that disadvantaged pupils and their families will have experienced greater challenges than most of their peers. These challenges will, in many cases, have restricted opportunities to engage in online learning as well as placing pressure on parents/carers to create a supportive learning environment within the confines of their home. This has been recognised by the government and, as a result, a £1 billion 'catch-up premium' funding package has been announced which aims to tackle the impact of lost teaching time.

Catch-up funding

- the £1 billion funding includes a one-off £650 million premium for all state funded schools in England
- this £650 million funding will be allocated to schools in 3 tranches during academic year 2020 to 2021 and will be calculated on a per pupil basis
- schools have the flexibility to spend their funding in the way they consider most effective to help pupils catch up for lost learning; this could include small group or one-to-one tuition
- the Education Endowment Foundation has published [a guide to help schools spend their catch-up funding effectively](#), which includes other strategies alongside small group tuition
- in addition, a £350 million National Tutoring Programme is being launched – schools will have access to subsidised tuition for disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils aged 5 to 16 years
- the DfE are also providing access to laptops and tablets for disadvantaged children in certain year groups; DfE have published [information](#) to help schools and trusts access these devices

The DfE have provided [information for schools](#) which further details the catch-up premium funding allocation. The government makes clear their expectation that governors and trustees scrutinise school plans to use funding in line with their specific catch up priorities.

Economic hardship and reduced time in school will have widened the gap which exists between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. [Analysis](#) published by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) finds that the school closures are likely to have reversed the progress made closing this gap over the last decade. Furthermore, the economic legacy of COVID-19 is likely to result in more pupils experiencing poverty and challenging family circumstances that create educational disadvantage.

As well as a systemic response and government funding, these complex issues require leadership and governance decision-making to support schools to close the attainment gap, and to provide access to the pastoral and mental health support needed by pupils who have suffered neglect, abuse, anxiety or bereavement during the pandemic.

A strategic approach to reducing the impact on disadvantaged pupils

As schools open to more pupils, governing boards will reinstate a routine but strategic cycle of business supported by their [integrated curriculum and financial planning](#) and the normal checks and balances of governance. This requires governing boards and their senior executive leaders to assess their school/trust vision and strategic priorities in the light of COVID-19. We recommend that governing boards schedule a discussion with their senior executive leader at the earliest available opportunity.

This discussion should be focused on the recovery phase from September and how best to support disadvantaged pupils to regain the learning they have lost during the period of partial closure. However, it should remain grounded in the established features of successful strategies for raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils.

These strategies, according to the [National Foundation for Educational Research](#), are: a whole school ethos of attainment for all, addressing behaviour and attendance, high quality teaching for all, meeting individual learning needs, deploying staff effectively, data driven and responding to evidence, and clear responsive leadership.

Governing boards should discuss recovery plans and encourage their senior executive leader to give thought to:

- How the school/trust intends to reduce the impact of partial school closure on:
 - the achievement and progress of all pupils
 - how this is monitored and assessed (e.g. reliability of data)
 - the number of pupils who now count as disadvantaged
 - the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and the attainment gap
 - their barriers to learning (and not just those that are addressed by teaching and learning)
- The research, proven practice and local networks the school/trust can draw on to inform their approach to overcoming barriers to learning and achievement created or exacerbated by COVID-19.
- How to balance academic catch-up (pure teaching and learning) with the wider pastoral and family support needed to address circumstances that affect behaviour, attendance and attitudes to learning.
- Which policies need to be reviewed, updated and aligned with the overall school/trust strategy in light of COVID-19. The Pupil Premium strategy (see below) will need to be rooted in the context of the times.
- The support and CPD that all staff (including school leaders) require to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on all pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils.
- The financial planning and resource implications of new/revised strategic priorities designed to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on the disadvantage gap and the achievement and progress of all pupils.

Discussion of the above is unlikely to result in wholesale changes being made to the school/trust improvement plan or the governing board's strategy document, nor should it create an industry for school leaders in producing additional plans. More likely, it will result in governing boards and their senior executive leaders identifying the short-to-medium term objectives for recovering lost learning, and adjustments that are needed to the longer-term objectives in order for them to have a sustainable impact (e.g. stakeholder engagement initiatives).

Considering the Pupil Premium strategy in the light of COVID-19

The Pupil Premium is additional funding given to schools to narrow attainment gaps between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils. A [guide to the Pupil Premium](#) is available for NGA members in our Knowledge Centre. It includes a section on monitoring the impact of the funding that the school/trust receives.

It's important that governing boards review the school/trust strategy (written by school staff) for using this funding in light of COVID-19 and seek assurances from their senior executive leader that the plan is still the right one targeted at the right pupils. It may be the case that the Pupil Premium funding received by the school/trust needs to be distributed in a different way that reflects the increase in social, emotional and health issues that impact upon pupils' learning. All pupils will require some catch-up education and, as well as supplementing this, the Pupil Premium can be targeted on tackling the identified barriers of the disadvantaged pupils.

Questions to ask

1. What do we know about options for catch-up education for disadvantaged pupils – what research is available?
2. What can we do to support our pupils to re-socialise and re-establish positive learning habits?
3. What about the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of our pupils?
4. How can we increase pupil attendance and parental engagement?
5. How do we optimise the situation for all pupils and their learning?
6. How do we support and develop our staff to close the disadvantage gap?
7. What are the resource implications of focusing on new and/or different priorities – do we need to adjust our strategy for spending our Pupil Premium grant funding?

Further reading

[Preventing the disadvantage gap from increasing during and after the Covid-19 pandemic](#) – a report published by the Education Policy Institute

[Tackling the disadvantage gap during the COVID-19 crisis](#) – a briefing from the Children's Commissioner

[Social mobility and COVID-19](#) – a report from the Sutton Trust

NGA's [GOLDline advice service](#) has provided an essential service to all governing boards with governance questions during the COVID-19 period. As of September, the service is once again available for NGA GOLD members only.

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