Pockets of poverty

The challenge for schools with small proportions of FSM pupils

department for
children, schools and families

Contents

Foreword

There is a particular underachieving group in many of our schools which can easily be overlooked, especially when it represents a relatively small proportion of the school's population. Its make-up does not directly equate to any particular ethnic group, to gender or to Special Educational Needs, although it may include pupils from any or all of these. Its defining characteristic is comparative poverty, and it can broadly be equated to pupils entitled to Free School Meals (FSM)[1].

Although we all recognise that this identification is very rough and ready, the measure still forms a useful flag for a potentially vulnerable group of pupils, especially when moderated through a school's own detailed knowledge of individuals and its understanding of its catchment area, work patterns, housing and economy. At every stage of compulsory education, the overall gap in attainment between FSM pupils and their non-FSM peers is a significant cause for concern as illustrated in Chart 1 in Annex 1. Disadvantaged pupils are more likely to be concentrated in primary schools with high FSM proportions; this is less true in secondary schools. About half of pupils entitled to FSM are to be found in the third of schools with greatest concentration of disadvantage and the other half are spread across the other two thirds of schools. In fact 28 per cent of secondary FSM pupils attend schools with below average FSM numbers (i.e. less than 13 per cent of the school population).

Whilst the achievement gaps for other groups have closed, the FSM pupil group has remained relatively static and as a result is now one of the most underachieving groups in our school population. Of course not all pupils within the group underachieve, but even those who appear to do well initially can find it harder to sustain progress as they get older.

In schools which have a comparatively large proportion of FSM pupils, their progress is often a significant factor in the schools' overall success and schools must by necessity adapt their policies and approaches to suit the prevailing culture. However, a recent investigation by DCSF school standards advisers suggested that in schools with comparatively low proportions of FSM pupils their needs are less likely to be *specifically* identified and met, and inadvertently their culture and expectations are swamped by those of their more affluent peers.

These pupils are actually doubly disadvantaged. They experience all the difficulties associated with their comparative poverty *and* they find themselves in a significant minority, having to live in the midst of a community and school population who are more affluent, perhaps considerably more affluent, than they are. They represent a 'pocket of poverty' within their community and school.

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1 Some possible concerns about the FSM measure are addressed in Annex 3.

Disadvantaged pupils carry with them the awareness of *lack*, of being less affluent, less mobile, less experienced and less 'savvy' than others who eat better, dress better and are in every sense better off than they are. Socially, they are sometimes ill at ease, or embarrassed or out of their element. Even the local high street can be alienating, full of things they and their families cannot even dream of affording. They live in a culture where people behave, speak and think in ways which reflect their more privileged backgrounds. They constrain their aspirations. In the playground, they can find themselves derided or shunned by other pupils who recognise them as different and who have invented a range of abusive terms for poor pupils. Added to this, some pupils reflect the experiences of their parents who put their faith in work when there was plenty of unskilled work about, and who considered their own schooling as being of little value. Like every minority, disadvantaged pupils need a school community which values them, understands the challenges they face, and treats them with respect. Indeed, these are traditional value of the working class: pride, strength and dignity in their community.

Such isolated individuals or small groups are often not easily or quickly assimilated into the dominant culture, as teachers can misguidedly hope they will be. Rather their experience of school reflects and reinforces the alienating effect of their surroundings.

Yet such pupils are disadvantaged, not disabled, by their circumstances. They can progress well if given the opportunity to do so, together with the right balance of challenge and support. The reality is that low proportions of FSM pupils currently make much better progress in some schools than they do in others. The challenge for schools is to go beyond the obvious impact of poverty to address some of the hidden obstacles these pupils might experience.

Being aware of their situation is a starting point but we need to do more than that. We have encountered schools which are reluctant to identify FSM pupils for fear we may return the old shames of dinner tickets, separate queues and a new pauperism. This will not happen; denial is the greater risk. We need to monitor the progress of these pupils specifically, to identify their learning needs and barriers and to provide tailored intervention where necessary. We also need to be particularly demanding in seeking out both the general and the particular things we can do to support them in discovering and fulfilling their potential.

Your support in finding new ways to enhance the life chances of this key group of children is very much needed and appreciated. Thank you.

Sue Hackman

Sue Hackman
Chief Adviser on School Standards
Department for Children, Schools and Families

What's in here for us?

This booklet provides a framework to support discussion about the current progress and attainment of pupils in receipt of FSM, particularly where they form a relatively small proportion of the school cohort. The framework initially promotes discussion within the senior leadership team before extending the debate to include middle leaders and the staff as a whole. The booklet will support self-evaluation at all levels within the school and help to identify priorities for further development.

The booklet is structured as follows:

Section 1   A series of short tasks to support discussion of the issues using a particular group of FSM pupils in the school as a reference group

Section 2   Examples of effective practice organised into seven categories. For each category the following structure is used:

Rationale	Why the action is important
What effective schools do	Examples of successful approaches
Key considerations	Questions to support self-evaluation

Section 3   A simple self-evaluation tool to identify aspects for development

Annex 1   Data comparing the attainment of FSM pupils with that of other pupils

Annex 2   Possible pupil characteristics to inform Section 1

Annex 3   Responses to frequently expressed views to support discussion in Section 1

Annex 4   *Narrowing the Gap* – Resources

Note
The pupils who appear in the photographs in this booklet may or may not be in receipt of Free School Meals.

Section 1: For discussion

A. How does being poor impact on FSM pupils in our school?

The single common factor of FSM does not make this a homogeneous group of children or young people. Each child will have their own particular and often wide range of needs and barriers to learning. Nevertheless, evidence from schools serving disadvantaged communities suggests that a disadvantaged child is more likely than their more advantaged peers to display a number of characteristics which might limit their capacity to make good progress.

Select the pupils in receipt of FSM from a particular year group or key stage.

You will need access to:
- the names of the pupils;
- their home addresses, ideally displayed on a map of the school catchment area;
- their current attainment and progress data;
- your self evaluation guide before commencing with Task 1.

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Task 1

1. Why exactly do material and financial constraints have a negative impact on pupil attainment? (See the national data in Annex 1)

2. Look at the list of your selected FSM pupils.
   a. How does their performance and progress as a group compare with the average for the key stage or year cohort?
   b. Do the pupils have any characteristics in common? Are you able to make any generalised statements about, for example, their attitudes to learning, behaviour, etc.?

3. Where do your FSM pupils live? What do you think it is like for these pupils to live where they do and have fewer material advantages than their peers?

Note

A description of pupil characteristics frequently observed on visits undertaken by DCSF School Standards Advisers is available at Annex 2 for information. These are clearly examples only, and should not be taken in any sense as definitive or applying in all cases.

B. Some commonly held views

Some commonly held views are provided in this section as statements.

Task 2

How would you respond to the following viewpoints if you heard them
in your staffroom?

"Schools cannot address all society's ills – managing poverty is a job for social workers not teachers."

"Singling out FSM pupils for special support is contrary to a policy of equal opportunity."

"Poverty is a symptom of underperformance, not a cause of it."

"There are only a small number of FSM pupils in our school, so it is not a big issue for us."

"It is better to do nothing. Left alone, a minority of FSM pupils will be assimilated into the culture of the school in time."

"It is stigmatising to identify and target FSM/poor pupils."

Note
Some responses to these commonly held views are provided in Annex 3.

C. Final reflection and consideration of actions

Task 3

In the light of the pattern of performance of FSM pupils and your discussions,
consider the following questions:

1. What are the key messages we need to project to staff about support for
    FSM pupils?
2. What might be the main challenges we should anticipate from the pupils
    themselves and from staff?
3. Looking at the actions included in Section 2 and the associated self-evaluation
    in Section 3, what should be the school's development priorities?
4. Which staff are particularly well placed to contribute to this development?
5. Could you see them working together as a group on this?

Section 2: What schools can do

This section illustrates some of the good practice from effective schools. It can be used for comparison with the school's own approaches and to provide some self-evaluation questions.

To narrow gaps, satisfactory or even good progress for all is not in itself sufficient. The disadvantaged pupils may need to make accelerated progress to catch up and this needs specific targeting and strenuous pursuit.

Many schools are able to help disadvantaged pupils in some practical ways that really make a difference, for example, providing breakfast clubs in the morning for pupils whose ability to concentrate and learn might otherwise by hampered, and providing computers to disadvantaged pupils to extend home learning. Currently such provision is more common in schools with higher numbers of FSM pupils, but is just as needed by other minority groups of children in schools. Of course it is important that this support is provided in 'easy' ways that do not belittle, embarrass or offend the pupils and their families or carers.

In terms of pedagogy, there is now a growing body of evidence that certain key strategies have disproportionally greater benefits for FSM pupils, for example, the provision of one-to-one tuition and the recent primary intervention initiatives such as *Every Child a Reader* and *Every Child a Writer*. Evidence also suggests that FSM pupils can also benefit from more general strategies such as engagement in active learning, problem-solving and talk for learning.

But there is no easy or formulaic solution and evidence from the practice of schools which are effective in this area, suggests that the following range of actions can contribute significantly to narrowing the gap for FSM pupils. Many of which help all pupils, but are done with added focus or emphasis in respect of the group in question.
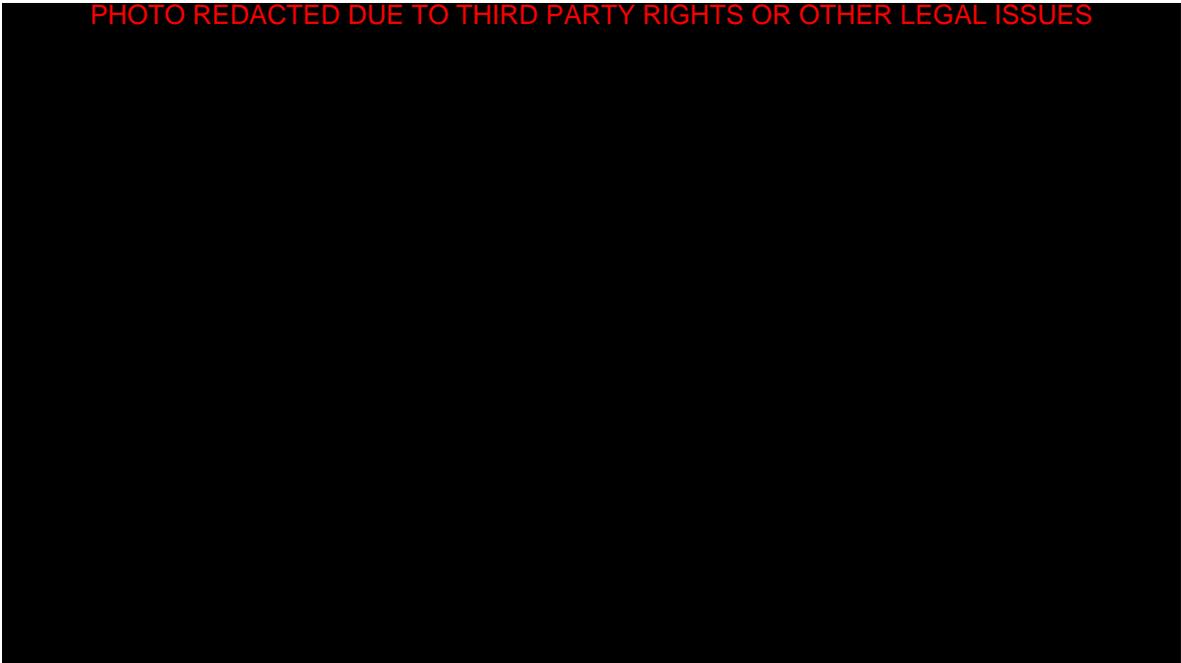
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Seven specific actions have been identified. These actions have no implied priority and are not intended to be sequential. However, *addressing the material differences which limit learning and progress* is likely to be a fundamental part of any overall strategy.

Improving the attainment of FSM children: a range of actions

A. Identify the *potentially* vulnerable group

Rationale

Some pupils from low-income families, of course, will not be under-performing at all, but their *potential* vulnerability still needs to be recognised. They are likely to come from families suffering stress as a result of shortage of money. They may also be very secretive about their home lives to disguise their lack of material benefits. As a result they often have low self-esteem and lack self-confidence. They may feel that the school has little to offer them. However, they often thrive on attention and will respond well to detailed feedback, particularly where it is almost immediate. Not surprisingly they like their progress to be visible and will become frustrated if they are struggling to 'get the hang' of an idea or concept. In a class where other pupils may have more intrinsic motivation they may feel that they are not getting the attention they need.

What effective schools do

In these schools the maxim is **'track and act'**. The progress of the FSM group in each year is tracked and regular pupil progress meetings are held with each pupil. **Mentors** or tutors do this without isolating or separating the children in any tangible or apparent way. At leadership level the FSM pupils are often regarded as a **virtual class** or group for tracking and monitoring purposes.

In a number of schools a member of staff or small group of staff are given **responsibility** for the progress of the virtual groups. This may work particularly well when these staff have their origins in low-income families. Another option is to give FSM pupils priority in the allocation of learning mentors or **one-to-one tuition**.

Within lessons **assessment for learning** (AfL) strategies are used to provide the on-going feedback the pupils need. The pupils like to know the success criteria for a piece of work and will often respond well to peer and self-assessment.

Key considerations

i.   Are FSM pupils identified and tracked in appropriate ways?

ii. Does an individual or group of teachers have a clear responsibility for tracking the progress of the FSM pupils?

iii. Is the progress of FSM pupils regularly monitored, reviewed and provision adapted accordingly?

B. Provide a supportive culture

Rationale

Pupils from poor backgrounds often lack regular counsel and support and do not always get the recognition they deserve for their personal skills and attributes. They are likely to be influenced strongly by any negative views their parents may have about schools and education and so may lack resilience and the emotional support they need to overcome the difficulties they encounter. Where they are in a small minority in the school they may not easily identify with the dominant culture and ethos of the school and may feel the school has nothing to offer them or, indeed, they have nothing to offer the school.

What effective schools do

All staff **know which pupils** are in receipt of FSM and, more importantly, know what actions they can take to maximise the progress these pupils make. They accept that the pupils won't necessarily align with the school's collective values and beliefs and so take positive steps to **raise the aspirations** of this group of pupils. In some schools past pupils are invited back to act as **role models** and to model future success.

Teachers are particularly aware of the need to ensure that the **resources** (e.g. texts and images) reflect the experiences of all pupils, including FSM minorities.

Induction for new staff is geared to the particular circumstances of the school, its locality and community. In some schools new staff 'walk the territory' to improve their awareness of any 'pockets of poverty'. In addition, early **lesson observation** by these new staff focuses on the progress being made by minority groups, including FSM pupils, in order to gain insights into their particular experience of school and learning.

Key considerations

i.   Are staff aware which pupils are in receipt of free school meals or suffer poverty?

ii. Are staff aware of the possible influence being in a minority group could have on pupils in receipt of FSM?

iii. Is specific induction provided for new staff which gives them an insight into the full social context of the school?

iv. Are past pupils who have overcome disadvantage used as role models?

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C. Ensure full access to the curriculum

Rationale

Pupils from low income backgrounds may display symptoms of physical hardship, such as being tired or disengaged because of anxiety, lack of sleep or simply because they did not have an adequate breakfast. They may find it very difficult at home to find a quiet space to do homework or access the resources needed to support their home learning. They also may not have a computer at home and access to the internet. They may not be able to access the school's intranet or Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). They may prefer not to take part in after school sports activities or go on education trips, because they are only too aware that their parents may not be able to afford the cost associated with these activities and their parents are unlikely to approach the school for financial support.

Their learning may also be limited by social and emotional issues which they have difficulty in resolving. Boys, in particular, may hide their emotions which may lead to inappropriate and unexpected behaviour towards others. In addition, they may be less skilled in using more formal language conventions and gauging when these are necessary.

What effective schools do

These schools use their budgets creatively so that pupils and their parents are not embarrassed to receive support. **Curriculum and cultural trips** are seen as an entitlement for all pupils with an understanding that all pupils will be included and do not need to opt in. **Computers** are provided for those pupils in need, or access is provided through out-of-school provision. **Books and resources** are made easily available either in the school or through partnership with a community centre or a library

Opportunities are provided to help overcome any **social and emotional barriers** that impact on learning. Many of the schools make good use of approaches recommended in the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme or similar programmes. In addition, specific support is provided to consolidate the use of more **formal language conventions**.

Key considerations

i.   Are the 'hardship funds' used in such a way to avoid stigmatising those who need to access them?

ii. Do the FSM pupils play a full part in curricular and extra-curricular trips and visits?

iii. Are barriers to learning identified and appropriate compensatory provision made, for example, language development and/or social and emotional aspects of learning?

D. Intervene quickly if progress stalls

Rationale

For many of the pupils it is the 'here and now' that is important. This may have its origins in the home where this attitude may be prevalent. They are unlikely to be convinced by deferred gratification of the sort, *'stick with it and in the end you will be glad you did!'* Rapid intervention to provide the support at the time they need it is important. Keeping up is more important than catching up because once behind the pupils may lack the resilience and motivation to remain engaged. In a class where the majority of pupils may be more accepting of obstacles to their progress, a teacher could easily 'lose' the commitment of this critical minority.

What effective schools do

Teachers appreciate the importance of providing very **regular feedback** on progress. Within whole class teaching they use **guided work**[2] to address misunderstandings and barriers to learning, often adapting lessons to facilitate this. FSM pupils also often respond particularly well to support from a **learning mentor**.

In the primary phase these schools capitalise on the current emphasis on narrowing the gaps in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and ensure that this is carried through into Key Stage 1 and beyond. In addition, **one-to-one tuition** is proving to be particularly effective for FSM children, and a full range of other **interventions**, such as *Every Child a Writer* for younger pupils, or *Study Plus* for older pupils, are also used.

Key considerations

i. Are a variety of fit-for-purpose pedagogies being used, as appropriate, to intervene and meet the learning needs of FSM pupils:
    - within whole-class teaching?
    - to support independent learning?
    - through guided learning?
    - through support from a learning mentor?
    - through one-to-one tuition?

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2 Further information on guided learning can be found in the National Strategies publication 'Pedagogy and Practice'.

E. Maximise opportunities for 'talk for learning'

Rationale

Pupils from low income backgrounds often like to engage in discussion about their ideas, sometimes more so than their peers, even though they may have a limited language repertoire and make regular use of informal modes of talk. They are often impatient when faced with passive approaches to teaching and learning. Through discussion they can improve their self-confidence and realise that they have a valuable contribution to make. Their fears about being demeaned by their peers can then be put aside. Additionally, the feedback they receive from the teacher or their peers helps them to retain a focus on learning.

What effective schools do

In effective schools strategies to encourage pupils to **express their views** and understanding through talk in lessons are a central part of lesson planning and CPD more generally. Typically opportunities are provided for structured **group or paired work**, guided talk, 'talk for learning' approaches and **peer assessment**. *Talk for Writing* can be particularly effective in the Early Years and Primary phases. These opportunities help both the pupils themselves in developing their language and thinking, and also in giving teachers **insights into their misconceptions** and any social or cultural barriers to their learning. Crucially these approaches reveal perspectives that may be different from those of the majority of their peers.

Key considerations

i. Are pupils given opportunities to both talk about their learning and to learn through talk?

ii. Are particular efforts made by teachers to listen to group conversations and to identify and address significant differences in social and cultural experiences of the pupils?

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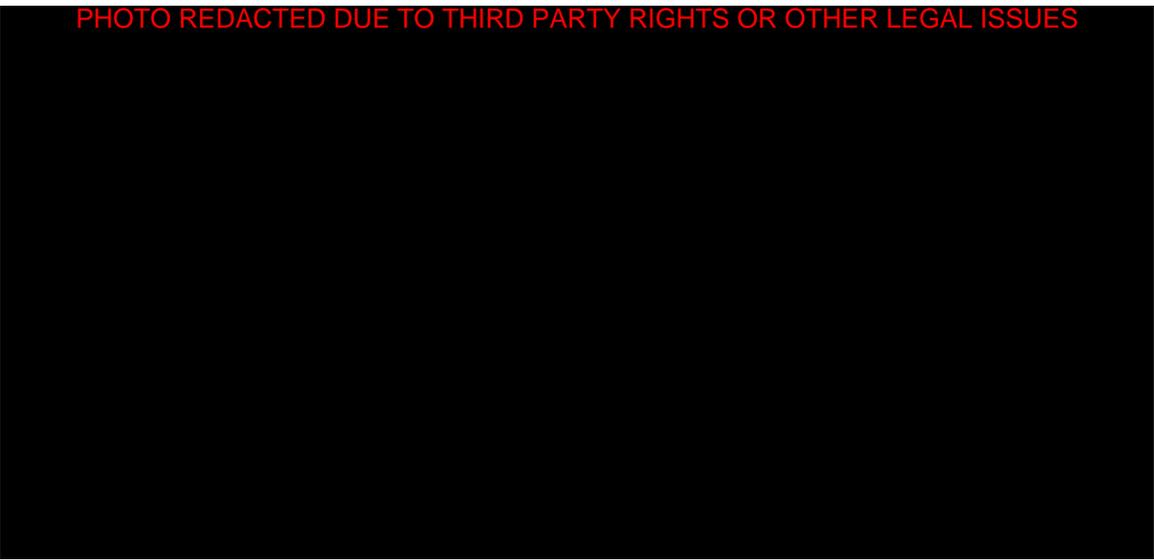
F. Involve 'hard to reach' parents and carers in their children's learning

Rationale

Pupils from low-income backgrounds are more likely than their peers to have parents who had poor experiences of school themselves and so may be reluctant to come into school. In single parent families the parent may find it very difficult to find time to get into school. In addition, the level of parental qualifications may mean that they are less confident about being able to help their children. For the pupils themselves, they are likely to respond very positively to overt expressions of interest and involvement by their parents.

What effective schools do

These schools concentrate not on providing learning opportunities for the parents themselves, even though these could have considerable benefits, but more on getting parents to **work alongside their children**, or to **discuss their progress**, so that they can see the important role they can play in supporting their children's learning. For example, bilingual assistants can have a significant impact through working with the families of EAL pupils. In striving to 'reach out' to parents and carers the schools go out of their way to make themselves more **approachable**. They often give responsibility for this engagement to staff who know the parent body well and the communities they come from.

Some schools use **'outreach' facilities** in the local community, such as a community centre or a library, to make contact with those parents who are reluctant to come into school.

Key considerations

i. What level of engagement does the school achieve with the parents and carers of their pupils in receipt of FSM?

ii. Are particular efforts made to involve the parents and carers of pupils from low income families?

iii. How approachable is the school to these 'hard to reach parents'?

G. Adopt narrowing the gap targets as performance indicators

Rationale

IIt is likely that some FSM pupils will have underachieved at previous key stages and so prior attainment may not be a good guide to potential attainment. Equally the pupils may have low aspirations for their future achievement. The potential for accelerated progress for these pupils is therefore high.

What effective schools do

In these schools FSM pupils are expected to make at least as much progress as all other pupils, whether this involves two levels of progress in Key Stages 2 and 3 or three levels of progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4. In addition, they may be given 'golden targets' which **anticipate accelerated progress**. **'Narrowing the gap' targets** are accorded similar status to those for overall standards, progress and Contextual Value Added (CVA). They are included in the Self Evaluation Form (SEF) and discussed with governors and the School Improvement Partner (SIP). In such schools the assumption is that as a group the FSM cohort is expected to **match the average performance** of the school as a whole.

Key considerations

i.   Are narrowing the gap targets included in the SEF?

ii. Are these targets shared with teachers and subject leaders?

iii. Do teachers and subject leaders have ready access to the data and are they asked to report on progress in terms of gap narrowing?

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Section 3: Self-evaluation tool

Evaluation of current practice

| Current Practice				
1 = a strong feature of current practice 4 = an aspect needing significant development	1	2	3	4
Against the seven areas of action to support a minority of FSM pupils				
A. Identify the *potentially* vulnerable group i. Are FSM pupils identified and tracked in appropriate ways? ii. Does an individual or group of teachers have a clear responsibility for tracking the progress of the FSM pupils? iii. Is the progress of FSM pupils regularly monitored, reviewed and provision adapted accordingly?				
B. Provide a supportive culture i. Are staff aware which pupils are in receipt of free school meals or suffer poverty? ii. Are staff aware of the possible influence being in a minority group could have on pupils in receipt of FSM? iii. Is specific induction provided for new staff which gives them an insight into the full social context of the school? iv. Are past pupils who have overcome disadvantage used as role models?				
C. Ensure full access to the curriculum i. Are the 'hardship funds' used in such a way to avoid stigmatising those who need to access them? ii. Do the FSM pupils play a full part in curricular and extra-curricular trips and visits? iii. Are barriers to learning identified and appropriate compensatory provision made, for example, language development and/or social and emotional aspects of learning?				

Current Practice				
1 = a strong feature of current practice 4 = an aspect needing significant development	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
D. Intervene quickly if progress stalls i. Are a variety of fit-for-purpose pedagogies being used, as appropriate, to intervene and meet the learning needs of FSM pupils: • within whole-class teaching? • to support independent learning? • through guided learning? • through support from a learning mentor? • through one-to-one tuition?				
E. Maximise opportunities for 'talk for learning' i. Are pupils given opportunities to both talk about their learning and to learn through talk? ii. Are particular efforts made by teachers to listen to group conversations and to identify and address significant differences in social and cultural experiences of the pupils?				
F. Involve 'hard to reach' parents and carers in their children's learning i. What level of engagement does the school achieve with the parents and carers of their pupils in receipt of FSM? ii. Are particular efforts made to involve the parents and carers of pupils from low income families? iii. How approachable is the school to these 'hard to reach parents'?				
G. Adopt narrowing the gap targets as performance indicators i. Are narrowing the gap targets included in the SEF? ii. Are these targets shared with teachers and subject leaders? iii. Do teachers and subject leaders have ready access to the data and are they asked to report on progress in terms of gap narrowing?				

Annex 1: Data comparing the attainment of FSM pupils with that of other pupils

The gap in the attainment of pupils receiving free school meals (FSM) and those that do not is very significant at all stages of compulsory education. Not all pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds have lower than average attainment but even those who appear to do well initially find it harder to sustain progress as they get older.

Chart 1
The odds of FSM pupils achieving are three times less than the rest of the cohort from early years through to university.
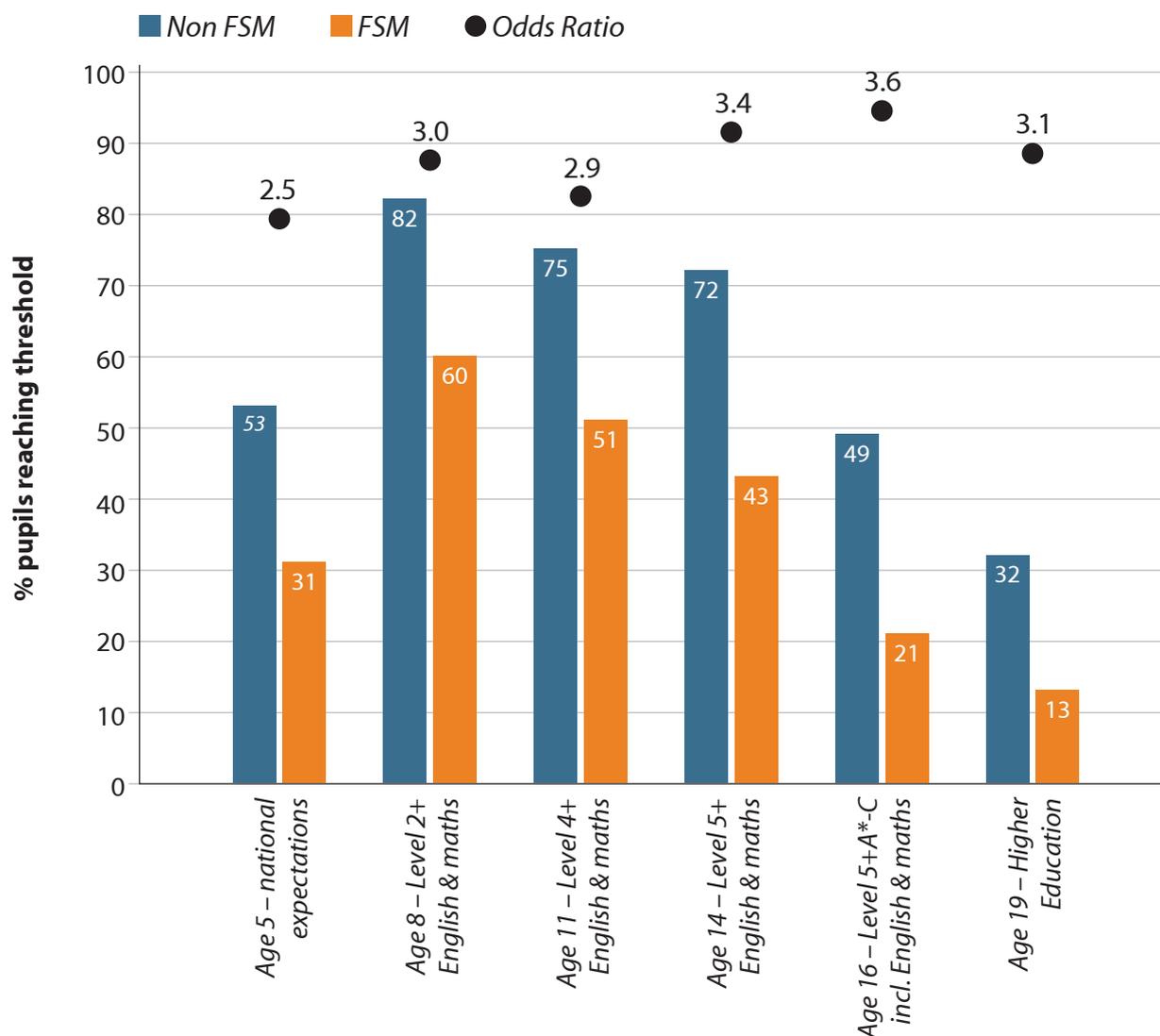
The FSM pupils are now one of the most underachieving groups and the gaps exceed those associated with gender and most of those associated with ethnicity.

Chart 2
KS4 Achievement in GCSE Performance for Major Ethnic Groups from 2003-2008

■ *2003* ■ *2008*

% pupils achieving 5+ A*-C inc English and maths

Ethnic Group	2003	2008
Black	26	40
Mixed	39	47
All pupils	40	48
White	41	48
Asian	41	51
Chinese	66	70
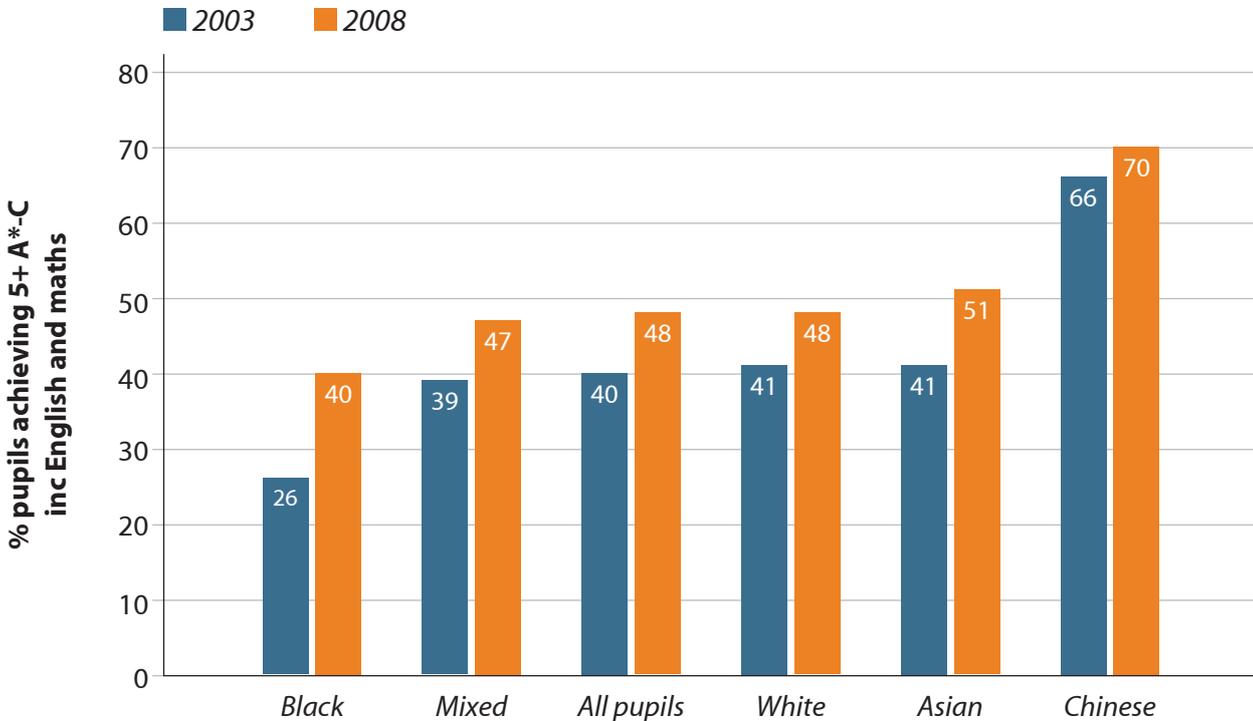
The majority of these pupils are taught in schools which have with relatively low proportions of FSM.

Chart 3
Disadvantaged pupils are not only found in disadvantaged schools

■ *Not eligible for FSM* ■ *Pupils eligible for FSM*

% pupils achieving 5+ A*-C inc English and maths

School FSM band	Not eligible for FSM	Pupils eligible for FSM
0-5%	63	30
5-9%	53	26
9-13%	46	22
13-21%	40	19
21-35%	36	21
35-50%	31	20
50%+	35	26

School FSM band ←→

Least deprived schools   Most deprived schools
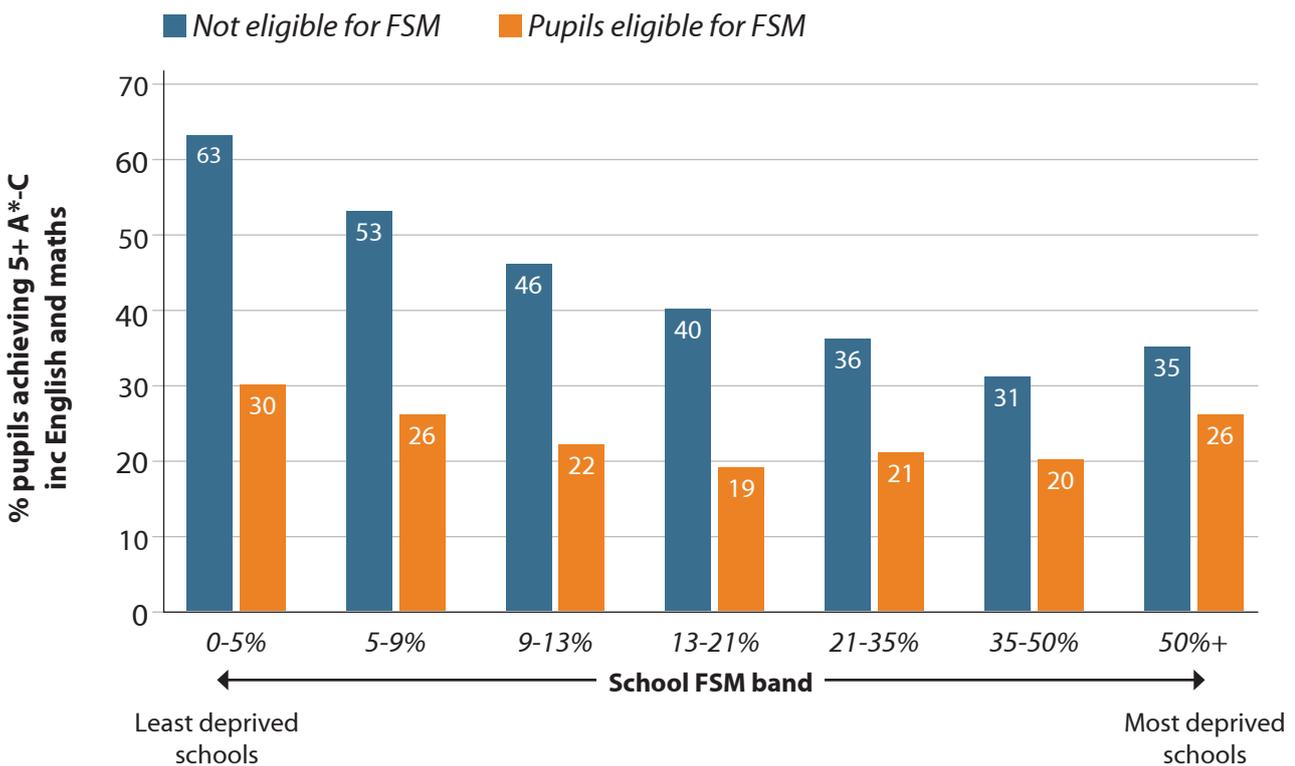
ANNEX 2: Possible pupil characteristics to inform Section 1

This annex includes some pupil characteristics frequently observed on visits undertaken by DCSF School Standards Advisers. These are clearly examples only, and should not be taken in any sense as definitive or applying in all cases.

The pupils may:
• lack everyday equipment;
• rarely take part in school trips and activities;
• lack regular counsel, feedback, support and praise for the personal skills they acquire;
• lack resilience and the emotional support that they need to overcome difficulties;
• hide their emotions, especially in the case of boys;
• have a limited language repertoire and rely almost entirely on informal modes of talk;
• be less tolerant of passive approaches to teaching and learning;
• mistrust authority and are particularly influenced by any negative attitudes to school displayed by their parents;
• place a 'lid' on their aspirations and adopt a restricted and unambitious view of their future prospects;
• be concerned about the here and now of their experience in school and are unconvinced by the 'it will be good for you in the long term' type of argument;
• display symptoms of physical hardship (e.g. be listless through lack of sleep or an adequate breakfast, fail with homework through lack of a suitable place to work or materials to work with)

In addition, the pupils may:
• feel different, out-of-place, and uncomfortable;
• sense discrimination, seem to be resentful or alienated;
• think that they are misunderstood;
• not easily identify with the dominant culture and ethos of the school; may not see it as 'my school';
• lack self-esteem or self-confidence;
• not readily ask for help;
• be evasive and slow to put themselves 'on the line';
• feel that they have little to contribute to the school or that the school has little to offer them;
• feel ignored, shunned, or demeaned by their peers;
• feel patronised or that they are 'charity cases';
• try too hard to be like everyone else; pretend to be what they are not in order to appear to fit in;
• rebel or be deliberately different as a means of defence.

ANNEX 3: Responses to frequently expressed views to support discussion in Section 1

This annex includes some of the most frequently expressed opinions related to raising the attainment of FSM pupils.

FSM is an inadequate measure of disadvantage

Eligibility for FSM is only a proxy measure of deprivation and gives no information about social class. However, it is useful as an indicator of wider deprivation because it is:

a) objective (based on publicly held data about family income and benefits entitlement);

b) binary (pupils are either FSM or non-FSM); and

c) held at school level – making the link to attainment of an individual pupil much easier to track.

The national pupil database holds FSM data mapped to unique pupil numbers so we have the advantage of longitudinal data. Using FSM as a proxy for poverty places no additional burden on schools or LAs to collect new information. There is nothing to stop headteachers from using a range of data – such as post-code measures, e.g. IDACI, or attitudinal classifications, e.g. MOSAIC – to help to identify their most vulnerable pupils. Having said this, it will be rare that FSM children need no special attention and long-term focus.

There are only a small number of FSM pupils in our school, so it is not a big issue for us

It may well be a big issue for them. It is a big issue precisely because there are only a few of them. It may help to consider them as a minority group in some of the same ways we would consider the needs of an ethnic minority.

Singling out FSM pupils for special support is contrary to a policy of equal opportunity

'FSM is an invisible issue at this school where the focus is on equality of opportunity.'
(Deputy Headteacher)

Not so. Providing equality of opportunity does not always mean treating everyone the same. There are times when what we need to do is take action to **equalise** opportunity?

Before we can narrow gaps, we must know what the gaps are – hence the importance of identifying vulnerable pupils and tracking their progress. The FSM gap is much larger than the gender or ethnicity gaps, and comparable only to the SEN and Looked after Children (LAC) gaps. It is not inevitable that FSM children will not achieve. Schools can, and do, make a difference. We have proved it with ethnicity – now we must undertake the same journey to eliminate underperformance directly linked to poverty.

Poverty is a symptom of underperformance, not a cause of it

'FSM is secondary to the judgement about how well pupils are performing – it wouldn't be right to judge them on the basis of FSM.'
(Headteacher);

'I don't think being eligible for FSM is relevant to the pupil as a learner.'
(Teacher)

No. Poverty and the correlated features of poverty, e.g. poor health and diet; poor parenting skills; low aspirations; inter-generational unemployment; poor transport, etc. are **causally linked** to school underperformance. Of course, FSM does not necessarily indicate underperformance, but it is a reliable indicator of **potential vulnerability**.

Schools cannot address all society's ills

Maybe not, but many poor children do well at school and some schools are better than others at addressing their specific barriers to learning. Within the classroom schools can target interventions on vulnerable groups to lock them into learning.

Schools cannot solve all of society's ills but through the right practices and by working with Children's Trusts, extended services and parents/ carers, they can do more – building on lessons learned in deprived areas over the past decade.

It is stigmatising to identify and target FSM / poor pupils

'We deliberately do not target FSM pupils in any way – they are not highlighted on the register, nor do we intend to do this.'
(Subject Leader)

Tracking by FSM does not mean visibly labelling FSM pupils or treating them overtly differently within the classroom. Monitoring, support and intervention all need to be pursued discretely and sensitively and we rely on the professionalism of teachers to achieve this.

Tracking can help reveal systematic low aspirations. Teachers should have high expectations of all pupils. Raising the performance of FSM pupils as an issue could highlight unconscious stereo-types of what poor children can achieve.

It is better to do nothing. Left alone, a minority of FSM pupils will be assimilated into the culture of the school in time.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. If ignored, the differences between the minority pupils and the majority culture are more likely to exacerbate the problem than negate it. The evidenced gaps in achievement are significant, long-standing and persistent. Experience suggests that doing nothing is all that is needed to perpetuate them.

ANNEX 4: *Narrowing the Gap* – Resources

A selection of relevant *Narrowing the Gap* resources are identified below:

A range of new resources is available on the **Narrowing the Gaps section of the National Strategies web area** **http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/leadership/narrowingthegaps**

Narrowing the Gaps – Resources to support the achievement of Black and minority ethnic, disadvantaged and gifted and talented children provides a full catalogue of materials **http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/227331**

Recently produced materials include:

Narrowing the Gaps: leadership for impact. These materials focus on what leaders and managers can do to accelerate the progress of children to narrow attainment gaps. It has a particular focus on those entitled to FSM but can equally be used to address other gaps. This group encompass the full spectrum of needs and backgrounds in the school community, including white and minority ethnic pupils, looked after children, gifted and talented (G&T) children and those with special educational needs (SEN). It includes two practical workshops on self-evaluation and school culture. **http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/253660**

Narrowing the Gaps: from data analysis to impact – The golden thread. This publication focuses on the effective use of data in primary and secondary schools and settings to focus and drive action to accelerate the progress of underachieving pupils entitled to free school meals (FSM). It aims to support senior teams, in both primary and secondary phases, by setting out a practical approach for seeing analysis through to impact, with a particular focus on narrowing gaps for disadvantaged groups of pupils. We have called this the 'golden thread' that connects analysis through to targeted action and impact. **http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/246991**

Narrowing the Gaps: from data analysis to impact – A practical guide builds on *The golden thread* by providing four CPD workshops on data and use of interactive RAISE online to analyse attainment, progress and plan ahead. A resource for senior and middle leaders in primary and secondary schools which offers staff development materials that can be used to shape whole-school training, dedicated sessions for middle leaders and cross-phase workshops for families of schools. **http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/246822**

Know the gaps e-learning module. This course is designed for school leaders, middle leaders and governors. It aims at developing the use of RAISEonline to analyse and interrogate school performance data according to different types of pupil vulnerability and disadvantage. On completion of this course learners will be able to locate and view data reports on pupils' progression collated and generated through RAISEonline, generate customised reports with specific pupil group(s) information and data **http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/254604**