



BRIEFING PAPER

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Support for more able and talented children in schools (UK)

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Summary

This House of Commons Library briefing details the support available for more able and talented students in UK schools, the attainment gaps existing amongst the more able, and summarises evaluations on the effectiveness of support provided.

Education is a devolved issue, and how students are identified, described and supported differs across the UK.

England

In England, there is no national definition of “more able” or “gifted” students or national support programme since the [Young Gifted and Talented Programme](#) closed in 2010.

The inspections body, Ofsted, [evaluates](#) whether schools “nurture, develop and stretch pupils’ talents and interests”. In two evaluative reports, published in [2013](#) and [2015](#), Ofsted was critical of the support provided to “more able” pupils, and called upon schools to improve their curriculums, the transition between primary and secondary school, and their work with families to support aspiration.

The Department for Education (DfE) [states](#) that the introduction of Grade 9 at GCSE and Progress 8 as an accountability measure allows schools to be held to account in how well they support “more able” students. The DfE says [Pupil Premium funds](#) allow schools to provide support to highly able students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The [Opportunity Areas scheme](#) also seeks to raise standards and support available.

Reports by the [Sutton Trust](#) and [Potential Plus UK](#) have argued that Ofsted should strengthen its inspection of provision for disadvantaged highly-able students and called upon the DfE to invest in programmes to evaluate the effectiveness of the support provided.

Wales

“More gifted and talented” students [should be identified and supported by schools](#), and provided with an individual learning pathway. [Pupil Development Grants](#) provide funding to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, whilst the [Seren network](#) seeks to support the most academically able gain entry to leading universities.

Estyn, the Welsh schools regulator, [concluded](#) in 2018 that, in around a third of schools, more able pupils were not achieving as well as they should. The Welsh Government [announced](#) additional funding for the Seren network and said further changes would be considered within the context of the new curriculum, due to be introduced in 2022.

Scotland

The [Education \(Additional Support for Learning\) \(Scotland\) Act 2004](#), as amended, requires schools to provide additional support to learners in need of support, including those who are “particularly able or talented”. The Government has also published [statutory guidance](#).

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In response to an [independent review](#), which found a “significant disconnect between experience and the stated aspirations of the legislation and policy”, the Scottish Government [said](#) in October 2020 that a new [Action Plan](#) would seek to enhance pupil experiences.

Northern Ireland

Schools should take steps to support [“Gifted and talented”](#) pupils, potentially through providing greater challenge in lessons, participation in extra-curricular activities and allow transfer to a post-primary school a year earlier than normal.

1. England

1.1 Identifying the “most able”

There is no single definition or term used to describe students who are either more able or have the potential to be so. Schools are also not required to keep a register of students falling within this category.¹

University of Warwick [research](#) in 2018, commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE), found schools used a range of methods to identify their “most academically able pupils”, including using their Key Stage (KS) 2 results, results from cognitive ability tests and information from parents and teachers.²

For the purposes of its most recent thematic research on the topic, published in 2015, Ofsted described the “most able pupils” as those who were:

Starting secondary school in Year 7 having attained Level 5 or above in English (reading and writing) and/or mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2.³

In 2016, 18% of students achieved at least a level 5 in both English and maths, including 10% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁴ From 2016 this means of scoring was discontinued and [new standards](#) were put in place. The DfE does not recommend making comparisons with this means of scoring and the new standards.

Other organisations have defined this cohort more narrowly. For example, Sutton Trust research has defined the top 10% of performers at KS2 English and Mathematics as “high attainers”. This constituted nearly 50,000 pupils in 2018.⁵

Prior to 2010

The Young Gifted and Talented programme (YGTP), run by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to 2010, was targeted at “children and young people with one or more abilities developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group (or with the potential to develop those abilities)”. Schools and colleges were expected to identify their gifted and talented learners, using [core guidance](#).⁶ These typically constituted the top 5-10% of pupils in each school and met either the definition of “gifted” or “talented”:

- ‘Gifted’ learners are those who have abilities in one or more academic subjects, such as maths and English.

¹ Ofsted, [The most able: an update on progress since June 2013](#), 2015, p4

² Department for Education (DfE), [Research to understand successful approaches to supporting the most academically disadvantaged pupils](#), November 2018, p29

³ [Ibid](#), p4

⁴ Sutton Trust, [Potential for success: Fulfilling the promise of highly able students in secondary schools](#), July 2018, p23

⁵ [Ibid](#), p23

⁶ Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), [Identifying gifted and talented learners- getting started](#), May 2008

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- 'Talented' learners are those who have particular abilities in sport, music, design or creative and performing arts. It includes those who are vocationally gifted.⁷

In 2010, some 820,000 children were identified as gifted or talented.⁸

1.2 Who are typically identified as “more able”?

There is no set national definition in England for identifying “more able” pupils.

Department for Education

In 2016, the DfE reformed KS2 standards in reading, writing, and maths. This means the data underpinning the 2015 Ofsted definition (outlined in the section above) of the “most able” pupils achieving Level 5 or above in reading and writing and/or mathematics at the end of KS2 is no longer available.

There are currently several measures of KS2 attainment, the main measures are the expected standard and the higher standard. The higher standard can be considered one way of identifying the “most able” pupils at Key Stage 2.

To reach the higher standard, a pupil must achieve a scaled score of 110 or more in the reading and maths tests, and an outcome of ‘working at greater depth’ in the writing teacher assessment (TA).

In 2019, 11% of all pupils in England achieved the higher standard, while 65% achieved the expected standard (around 68,000 and 420,000 pupils respectively).

Some groups of pupils are much more likely than others to achieve the higher standard. In 2019, on average:

- Girls were more likely to achieve the higher standard than boys (13% compared to 9% respectively).⁹
- State-funded pupils in London were the most likely to achieve the higher standard while Yorkshire and the Humber was the lowest (14% compared to 9% respectively).
- Pupils known to be eligible for free school meals (FSM) were much less likely than pupils that were not eligible, to achieve the higher standard (4% compared to 12% respectively).
- Pupils of Chinese ethnicity were the most likely to achieve the higher standard (28%) followed by pupils of Indian ethnicity (19%).

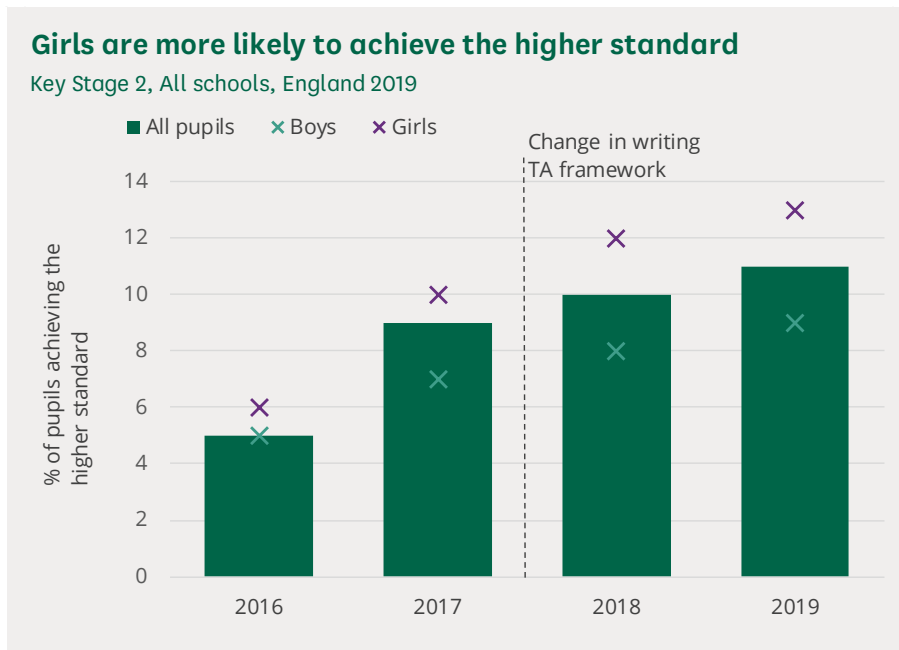
⁷ The Young Gifted and Talented Programme (YGTP), [About YG&T](#), archived 10 September 2008; DCSF, [Identifying gifted and talented learners- getting started](#), May 2008, p1; Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, [Oral evidence session: The Gifted and Talented Programme](#), HC 377-I, April 2010, Q49

⁸ Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, [Oral evidence session: The Gifted and Talented Programme](#), HC 377-I, April 2010, Q83

⁹ Includes pupils attending independent schools, all other characteristics data in the bullet points are state-funded pupils only.

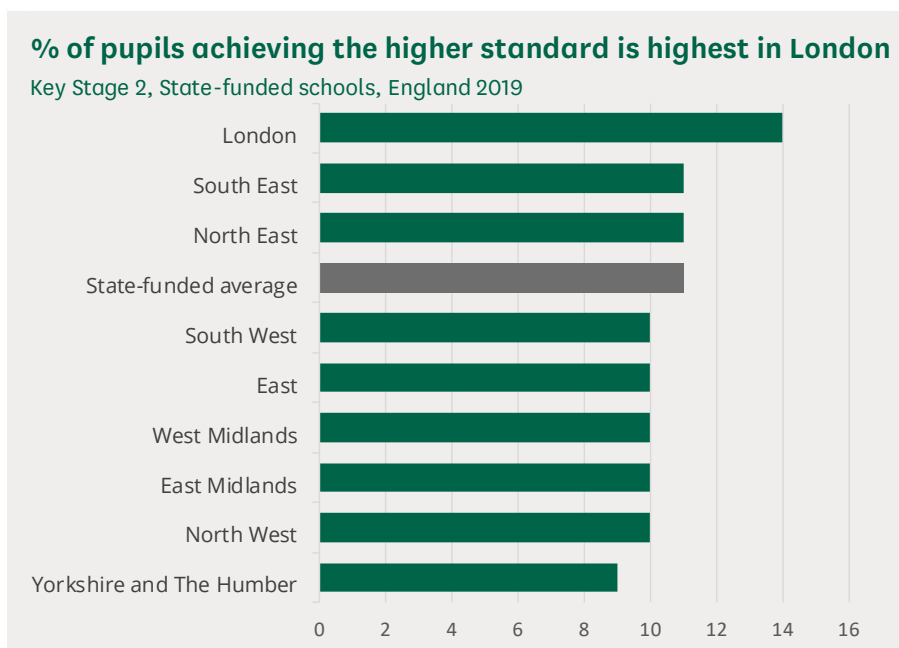
- Gypsy/Roma and Travellers of Irish Heritage were the least likely ethnic group to achieve the higher standard (1% respectively).
- Pupils born earlier in the academic year were more likely to achieve the higher standard than others. 14% of pupils born in September achieved the higher standard compared to 7% of pupils born in August.

Further detail is provided in the charts provided below.



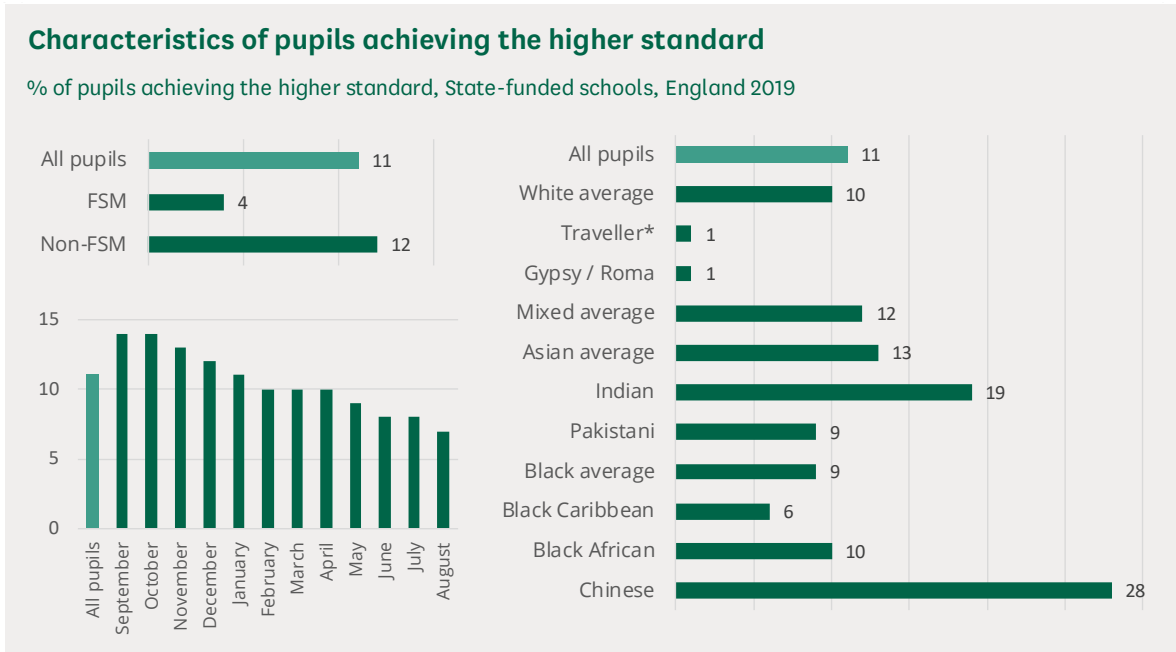
Notes: Figures for 2018 and 2019 are not directly comparable to previous years due to changes in the writing teacher assessment frameworks

Source: [National Curriculum Assessments Key Stage 2: 2019 revised](#), DfE (Table_N1a)



Source: [National Curriculum Assessments Key Stage 2: 2019 revised](#), DfE (Table_L_1)

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Note: Traveller of Irish heritage abbreviated to Traveller. Pupils known to be eligible for free school meals abbreviated to FSM.

Source: [National Curriculum Assessments Key Stage 2: 2019 revised](#), DfE (Table_N4a)

Sutton Trust

Using the definition of those who were in the top 10% for performance at KS2, the Sutton Trust's [Potential for success: Fulfilling the promise of highly able students in secondary schools](#) (2018), identified 49,929 students with previous high attainment, 5,059 (10%) of whom had, at any point in the previous six years, been eligible for free school meals.

The Sutton Trust described their background and attainment:

- A higher proportion came from White backgrounds (81%) compared to Black (3%), Asian (10%) and "Other" (7%).
- Greater proportions were identified in London and the South East (11.4% in both) and the lowest in Yorkshire and the Humber and East of England (9.1% and 9.9%, respectively).
- A greater proportion of grammar school pupils were high attainers compared to comprehensive students: 51% against 8%.
- Most comprehensives had a smaller number of high attainers: 43% (1,312) schools having 10 or fewer.
- In 2016, high attainers from disadvantaged backgrounds underperformed high attainers overall at GCSE: 52% of disadvantaged high attainers gained at least 5A*-A, compared to 72% of non-disadvantaged high attainers.¹⁰

¹⁰ Sutton Trust, [Potential for success: fulfilling the promise of highly able students in secondary schools](#), July 2018, pp24-9

1.3 The attainment gap of “more able” disadvantaged pupils

University Attendance

A report commissioned for the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, [Progress made by high-attaining children from disadvantaged backgrounds](#) (2014) found “high-achieving children from the most deprived families perform worse than lower-achieving students from the least deprived families by Key Stage 4.”¹¹

Assessing children born in 1991-92 and their university outcomes in 2010-2012, the report estimated the number of high-achieving children from lower income homes who, if they had the same trajectory as those from high income households,¹² would have attended an “elite university” (defined as Russell Group institutions or those with similar Research Assessment Exercise scores):

Of the 7,853 children from the most deprived homes who achieve level 5 in English and maths at age 11, only 906 make it to an elite university. If they had the same trajectory as a child from one of the least deprived families, then 3,066 of these children would be likely to go to an elite university, suggesting that 2,160 children are falling behind.¹³

GCSE grades

The Sutton Trust’s [Missing Talent](#) (2015) defined “high achievers” as those primary school pupils who scored in the top 10% nationally in their KS2 test. It identified around 7,000 pupils who, having achieved high KS2 results, five years later achieved GCSE results outside the top 25%. The “missing talent”, the Trust argued, were twice as likely to be highly able boys, and those in receipt of free school meals were twice as likely to be at risk of falling into the group.¹⁴

In its 2018 report, the Sutton Trust [summarised](#) the gaps in educational outcomes between highly able students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds:

Disadvantaged pupils who do perform strongly in primary school, [...] are much more likely to fall behind at secondary school, compared to other high attaining students, across a range of measures. While high attainers overall make about an average level of progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 (a Progress 8 score of 0.02, where the national average is zero), those from disadvantaged backgrounds fall substantially behind, with a negative Progress 8 score of -0.32.

[...] while 72% of non-disadvantaged high attainers achieve 5 A*-A grades or more at GCSE, only 52% of disadvantaged high attainers do. If high attaining disadvantaged students performed as well as high attaining students overall, an additional 1,000

¹¹ Centre for Analysis of Youth Transitions, [Progress made by high-attaining children from disadvantaged backgrounds](#), 2014, p8

¹² Background was based on whether the child had ever been in receipt of Free School Meals, local census data and the type of school attended—see Centre for Analysis of Youth Transitions, [Progress made by high-attaining children from disadvantaged backgrounds](#), 2014, pp15-16

¹³ [Ibid](#), pp9, 11-12

¹⁴ Sutton Trust, [Missing Talent](#), June 2015, p1

disadvantaged students would achieve at least 5A*-A at GCSE each year.¹⁵

1.4 Young Gifted and Talented Programme

The YGTP was a UK Government scheme that ran from 2002 to 2010. Its [webpage](#) has now been archived.

Provision for identified children included offering “additional stretch” in the classroom and opportunities for independent learning.¹⁶

Associated with the YGTP programme was the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, which was in place from 2002 to 2007. Based at the University of Warwick, the National Academy developed summer schools and outreach activities for the top 5% of 11 to 19-year olds.¹⁷

Evaluations

The then-Children, Schools and Families Committee held an [oral evidence session](#) on the YGTP in 2010. Alternatives to the YGTP raised included providing greater support for students to achieve targets such as A*-C grades at GCSE, improving social mobility, prioritising support for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and tackling the variation in the numbers identified as gifted or talented between schools.¹⁸ The Labour Government had intended to introduce changes to support the delivery of the YGTP, better integrate the programme into schools, and ensure schools had the funding to support their most able pupils, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds¹⁹

In 2010, 88% of primary schools and 98% of secondary schools had identified Gifted and Talented pupils.²⁰ A 2010 survey by Brunel University academics of 10% of school coordinators found that around half of students classed as gifted or talented were unaware they had been identified as such.²¹

The Sutton Trust in 2012 argued that the programme had created:

Confusion among teachers as to what the definition meant, and that the percentage of gifted and talented pupils in a school had very little relation to how pupils in that school performed in national tests. The work also found that pupils from low income backgrounds were much less likely to be classified as gifted and talented.²²

¹⁵ Sutton Trust, [Potential for success: fulfilling the promise of highly able students in secondary schools](#), July 2018, p3

¹⁶ DCSF, Identifying gifted and talented learners- getting started, May 2008, p7

¹⁷ Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, [Oral evidence session: The Gifted and Talented Programme](#), HC 377-I, April 2010 Q49

¹⁸ Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, [Oral evidence session: The Gifted and Talented Programme](#), HC 377-I, April 2010 Q49-

¹⁹ HC Deb, [Gifted Children, 10 February 2010](#), c1090WA

²⁰ The National Strategies, [The National Strategies 1997-2011](#), 2011, p34

²¹ V. Koshy, C. Pinheiro-Torres and C. Portman-Smith, [The landscape of Gifted and Talented Education in England and Wales. How are teachers implementing policy?](#), Research Papers in Education, 27, 2012, pp10, 13

²² Sutton Trust, [Educating the highly able](#), July 2012, piii

Abolition

The YGTP was not continued beyond 2010. The Coalition Government accepted the [recommendation of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions](#) that the YGTP would be reformed, “in line with the school-led approach to delivering a personalised education that meets the needs of individual pupils” and enable “more flexibility to schools to access the provision that best meets the needs of their gifted and talented pupils”.²³

The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions had [argued](#) that the programme was characterised by a “lack of direction...limited resources...[and] lack of support for many schools and colleges”.²⁴

1.5 Position since 2010

The DfE in 2014 confirmed that it had no plans to replace the YGTP.²⁵ In answer to a 2015 parliamentary question, the then-Education Minister, Lord Nash, said new accountability measures and grades would ensure schools support the most able pupils:

From 2016, our new headline secondary accountability measure, Progress 8, will ensure schools are held to account for the progress made by all pupils, including the most able. In addition, from 2017, the introduction of the new top ‘grade 9’ for GCSE set at a level above the current grade A*, will ensure that the achievements of the very highest performers are recognised.²⁶

The DfE’s white paper [Educational excellence everywhere](#) (2016) set out in further detail how Ofsted, reformed GCSEs and curriculum changes intend to stretch both the lowest-attaining and highest able.²⁷

More information on Progress 8 can be found in the Library briefing, [Changes to school accountability and “league tables” in England in 2016](#) (2016).

Parents may also seek a place for their child outside their normal age group, if the child is gifted or talented. Admissions authorities, usually a local authority or the school governors, must make clear in their admissions arrangements the process for requesting admission out of the normal age group and make their decision in the best interests of the child concerned.²⁸

Targeted programmes

The DfE briefing for school leaders on [Supporting the attainment of disadvantaged pupils](#) (2015) cites a whole school ethos of attainment

²³ HM Government, [Unleashing aspiration: The Government response to the Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions](#), January 2010, p11

²⁴ Panel on Fair Access, [Unleashing aspiration: The final report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions](#), 2009, p52

²⁵ PQ HL 3435 [[Gifted Children](#)], 4 December 2014

²⁶ PQ HL 5759 [[Gifted Children](#)], 16 March 2015

²⁷ DfE, [Educational excellence everywhere](#), March 2016, pp98-99.

²⁸ DfE, [School Admissions Code: Statutory guidance](#), 2014, p25, para 2.17 and 2.17A-B

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for all, high quality teaching and addressing behaviour and attendance as factors supporting achievement.²⁹

A brief selection of relevant schemes is summarised below.

Pupil Premium

The pupil premium was introduced in 2011 and provides additional funding to schools in England with the aim of raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. The DfE [policy paper](#) on the premium states that schools should focus their interventions on the “most academically able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds [...] as much as pupils with low results”.³⁰

The DfE has invested £137 million to research and promote the most effective ways of using the pupil premium through the [Education Endowment Foundation](#).³¹ More information can be found on its [website](#).

Further information can be found in the Library briefing [The pupil premium](#). Section 3 references evaluations and reports on the premium’s impact since its introduction.

Opportunity Areas

Since October 2016, the DfE has sought to increase social mobility through targeting support at “social mobility cold spots”, identified by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission.³² The scheme is based on the DfE’s [Unlocking talent, fulfilling potential](#) (2017) plan, which seeks to close the attainment gap, particularly through intervention in early years and in literacy skills.³³

Encouraging applications to university

Ofsted’s 2015 report on support for the “most able” pupils (see Section 1.7) said many schools did not encourage these students to apply to “top” universities (defined as Russell Group Universities in the report).³⁴

The Office for Students (OfS), which assumed the role of regulator for the English Higher Education (HE) sector in 2018, has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, including in access.³⁵ HE providers wishing to charge higher level tuition fees must have an [Access and Participation Plan](#) agreed with the OfS, in which providers should set out the measures they will take to ensure students from disadvantaged backgrounds and unrepresented groups apply.³⁶

The Library briefing on [The Office for Students](#) provides further detail.

²⁹ DfE, [Supporting the attainment of disadvantaged pupils: Briefing for school leaders](#), 2015, p7; Government Social Research, [School cultures and practices: Supporting the attainment of disadvantaged pupils](#), 2018

³⁰ DfE, [Policy paper: Pupil premium](#), 30 January 2020

³¹ PQ HL 9682 [[Education: Disadvantaged](#)], 27 October 2020

³² DfE, [Social mobility and opportunity areas](#), 20 September 2018; DfE, [Opportunity areas programme to support young people hit hardest by pandemic](#), 17 July 2020; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, [The social mobility index](#), 2016

³³ DfE, [Unlocking talent, fulfilling potential](#), Cm 9541, 2017, p8

³⁴ Ofsted, [The most able students: An update on progress since June 2013](#), 2015, p6

³⁵ PQ 127840 [[Universities: Disadvantaged](#)], 8 February 2018

³⁶ PQ 82409 [[Higher Education: Equality](#)], 28 August 2020

1.6 School inspections

Ofsted's [School Inspection Handbook](#) (May 2019) does not include explicit reference to "most able" pupils. It states "outstanding" and "good" schools should promote the personal development of all pupils and provide opportunities to "nurture, develop and stretch pupils' talents and interests".³⁷ The Handbook also states schools should ensure "high academic/vocational/technical ambition for all pupils".³⁸

In response to its 2013 [evaluation on school support for the most able students](#), Ofsted committed to focus on inspecting the progress made by such students, and establish how effectively the pupil premium is used to support those from disadvantaged backgrounds.³⁹

Potential Plus UK and the Sutton Trust have both argued for the reintroduction of a reference to "most able" pupils in the Ofsted inspection handbook, having previously been referenced in earlier versions.⁴⁰ For example, the 2015 handbook stated inspectors "should pay particular attention to whether more able pupils in general and the most able pupils in particular are achieving as well as they should".⁴¹

1.7 Ofsted evaluations

2013 Report

In 2013, Ofsted published [The most able students: Are they doing as well as they should in our non-selective secondary schools?](#). This argued that "in too many lessons observed by inspectors, teaching is not supporting our highest attaining students to do well. We know from our inspections that this is particularly the case in mixed ability groups."⁴² The report was based on lesson observations, Ofsted visits and parental surveys.

Ofsted cited the attainment gap between the most able attending comprehensive schools compared to those at selective schools as evidence that improvements were needed:

Of those pupils who achieved Level 5 in both English and mathematics at the end of primary school, just 35% achieved an A* or A grade in both subjects at GCSE in 2012 while at non-selective secondary schools; 65% did not. Over one quarter – 27% – of these previously high-attaining students did not achieve at least a B grade for both subjects.⁴³

Other reasons Ofsted cited for their conclusion included (bold added):

- **Transition arrangements from primary to secondary school [were] not effective enough** to ensure that students maintain their academic momentum into Year 7.

³⁷ Ofsted, [School inspection handbook](#), May 2019, p62

³⁸ [Ibid](#), p41

³⁹ Ofsted, [The most able students](#), 2013, p11

⁴⁰ Potential Plus UK, [Ofsted reporting of provision for the most able pupils](#), February 2020, p3

⁴¹ Ofsted, [School inspection handbook](#), January 2015, p63

⁴² Ofsted, [The most able students](#), 2013, p6

⁴³ [Ibid](#), p12

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- **Teaching is insufficiently focused on the most able at Key Stage 3.** In over two fifths of the schools visited for the survey, [Ofsted said] students did not make the progress that they should, or that they were capable of, between the ages of 11 and 14.
- **Inequalities between different groups of the most able students were not being tackled satisfactorily.** The attainment of the most able students who are eligible for free school meals, especially the most able boys, lagged behind that of other groups.
- **Too few of the schools worked with families to support them in overcoming the cultural and financial obstacles** that stood in the way of the most able students attending university, particularly universities away from the immediate local area.⁴⁴

The report made sixteen recommendations to the DfE, maintained schools and academies, and for Ofsted itself (see above, Section 1.6). These included developing measures to assess progression of the most able students from KS4 to KS5 and promotion of new destination data. Ofsted recommended schools work more closely with families to help them overcome obstacles to university application, provide greater opportunities to develop skills and confidence, and evaluate mixed-ability teaching to ensure that all students are sufficiently challenged.⁴⁵

2015 Update report

In an update in 2015, [The most able students: An update on progress since June 2013](#) (2015), Ofsted argued “that too little has been done by schools to address the concerns raised in the previous report. In other words, our most able students in non-selective schools are still not being challenged to achieve the highest levels of scholarship”.⁴⁶ It expressed hope that the introduction of [Progress 8 as an accountability measure](#) would “be helpful in focusing schools on raising their aspirations for all students”.⁴⁷

Based on visits to schools, interviews with staff and student surveys, Ofsted identified areas of underperformance for the most able students:

- Schools where the most able students make up a small proportion of the school’s population and those schools where proportions are higher;
- Between the disadvantaged most able students and their better off peers; and
- Between the most able girls and the most able boys.⁴⁸

Ofsted made eleven recommendations, including some that overlapped with the 2013 report. Recommendations included improving the quality

⁴⁴ [Ibid](#), p9

⁴⁵ [Ibid](#), pp10-11

⁴⁶ Ofsted, [The most able students: An update on progress since June 2013](#), 2015, p8; Ofsted, [Schools not doing enough to support most able students](#), March 2015

⁴⁷ [Ibid](#), p5. Progress 8 measures student’s progress between KS2 and KS4. It is a points score calculated from a pupil’s best 8 grades across 3 subject-based categories. For more information, see the Library Briefing Paper, [Changes to School Accountability and ‘League Tables’ in England in 2016](#), 2016, p. 14.

⁴⁸ Ofsted, [The most able students: An update on progress since June 2013](#), 2015, p5

and design of curriculum delivery to ensure that work provides the correct level of challenge and improving transition arrangements between primary and secondary schools to understand previous student performance.⁴⁹

Comparisons of Ofsted reports

In 2020, Potential Plus UK compared analysis of Ofsted reports published in June 2018 and June 2019 in its [Provision for the most able pupils](#). It said progress was still required in several areas, including in relation to information collected during Ofsted reports:

1. The percentage of schools in which provision for the most able pupils needed improvement was consistently high, with more than 44% of Ofsted reports highlighting the need for a change to provision.
2. There continues to be a need for improvement to the provision for the most able pupils in every Ofsted category of school.
3. The most common changes needed were in the level of challenge for the most able pupils and in the progress made by these pupils.
4. There was rise in the number of comments expressing concern about the expectations teachers had for the most able pupils between June 2018 and June 2019.
5. Early Years and Primary Phase Schools had the highest percentage (50%) of schools with poor provision for the most able pupils.
6. There was a significant increase in the number of Secondary Phase Schools inspected that did not mention provision for the most able at all between June 2018 and June 2019.⁵⁰

Potential Plus recommended changes to the Ofsted inspection framework to better evaluate support for the “most able” and for the commissioning of further research to determine best practice in supporting learners.⁵¹

1.8 Other evaluations

Sutton Trust 2018

The Sutton Trust’s [Potential for success: Fulfilling the promise of highly able students in secondary schools](#) (2018) argued that “stronger evidence and evaluation of activity to support the highly able” was needed, and that “Ofsted inspections should as a matter of course assess a school’s provision for its disadvantaged highly able students”.⁵² The report acknowledged difficulties in identifying who highly able students are, and stressed all activities should be available to all children:

Due to the difficulties in identifying highly able students, wherever possible, interventions to benefit the highly able should be

⁴⁹ [Ibid](#), pp9-10

⁵⁰ Potential Plus UK, [Ofsted reporting on provision for the most able pupils](#), February 2020, p2

⁵¹ [Ibid](#), p5

⁵² Sutton Trust, [Potential for success](#), July 2018, p5

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available to all students. All classes should have built-in stretching activities, and while certain extra-curricular activities may be particularly promoted to highly able students, where possible they should remain open for all students to attend.

Setting should be used with caution, as it can harm the attainment of students in lower sets. Additionally, due to the difficulties in identifying highly able disadvantaged students, such students are less likely to end up in top sets, and so more likely to be harmed by the practice. If setting is used, sets should be fluid, with regular opportunities for students to move between different sets.⁵³

Sutton Trust's Mobility Manifestos, 2015-2019

The Sutton Trust's Mobility Manifestos in 2015, 2017 and 2019 called for the introduction of an evidence-led fund to provide support for young people with high academic potential in state schools.⁵⁴

In a House of Lords debate on social mobility in January 2020, Baroness Berridge, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the School System, said, in response to the Trust's recommendation, that support was given to schools with the intention of strengthening social mobility:

The Sutton Trust also recommends that the Government establish an evidence-led fund to support young people with high academic potential from disadvantaged backgrounds. As I mentioned, we spend £2.4 billion on the pupil premium and there is internationally recognised research. We are pleased that the Social Mobility Commission has recognised the importance of the opportunity areas, which are promoting social mobility in 12 deprived parts of the country. There will be a one-year extension to that programme, with £18 million of funding. My noble friend Lord Bates will be pleased to hear that Opportunity North East is a £24 million investment with local partners to tackle the specific issues holding back young people in that region.⁵⁵

⁵³ [Ibid](#), p7

⁵⁴ Sutton Trust, [Mobility Manifesto](#), 2015, pp1, 9; Sutton Trust, [Mobility Manifesto](#), 2017, p8; Sutton Trust, [Mobility Manifesto](#), 2019, p2

⁵⁵ HL Deb, [Social mobility](#), 29 January 2020, c 1498

2. Wales

2.1 Definition

The Welsh Government has published [guidance](#) on identifying, assessing and providing for “more able and talented learners” (MAT). This provides the following definition of a MAT learner and how such learners can be identified:

5 [...] In Wales the term ‘more able and talented’ encompasses approximately 20% of the total school population, and is used to describe pupils who require enriched and extended opportunities across the curriculum in order to develop their abilities in one or more areas. In every school there will be a group of pupils who require greater breadth and depth of learning activities than is normally provided for the usual cohort of learners.

6. Ability and talent can manifest itself in many different ways e.g. academic, practical, creative and social fields of human activity. The needs of more able and talented pupils cannot be separated from the move to raise standards for all pupils. Research shows that schools that focus on the needs of more able and talented pupils improve the quality of learning and raise standards of achievement for all pupils.⁵⁶

2.2 Guidance

The [Meeting the Challenge: Quality Standards in Education for MAT Pupils](#) (Circular 006/2008) (May 2008), states local education authorities should support schools to develop their provision for MAT learners through organising training, teaching material, links with external agencies (such as arts bodies, businesses and universities), and identifying additional funding.⁵⁷

Schools are required to provide each MAT learner with an individual learning pathway, within the context of a “whole school approach” that provides for pupils of all abilities.⁵⁸

The [circular](#) provides the following summary of what MAT learners can expect, focusing on providing challenge within a broad curriculum with opportunities for independent learning and raising aspiration:

Providing challenge in day to day teaching is central to meeting the needs of more able and talented pupils. Evidence will show that teaching is motivational, provides challenge, reflects assessment for learning principles, and is appropriately differentiated to meet the needs of learners. Pupils also need the opportunity to develop the skills of independent learning. There also needs to be evidence of regular staff development which focuses on improving teaching and learning. The curriculum should be suitably broad, balanced and flexible to take account of the personal learning needs of more able and talented pupils. High quality careers guidance and pastoral support ensures that

⁵⁶ Welsh Government, [Meeting the challenge: Quality standards in education for more able and talented pupils](#), Circular 006/2008, May 2008, paras 5-6

⁵⁷ [Ibid](#), paras 7-10

⁵⁸ [Ibid](#), paras 18, 19

18 Support for more able and talented children in schools (UK)

more able and talented pupils make choices that are appropriately aspirational, and helps secure their emotional well being.⁵⁹

Further details of standards can be found in Appendix 1 to the [Circular](#).

Inspection

Estyn, the Welsh education inspectorate, when evaluating schools, considers the outcomes achieved by learners, including MAT pupils, and how well schools and local authorities support positive attitudes to learning. It has published [Supplementary guidance: MAT learners](#) (Autumn 2017) to help schools design and deliver support for MAT learners.⁶⁰

2.3 Specific programmes

Seren Network

The [Seren network](#) is a collaboration between state schools, colleges, universities, alumni, local authorities, the Welsh Government and third sector organisations. The network aims to support the most academically able students and help them gain entry to leading universities. It was initially limited to those aged 16 or over (Years 12 and 13) but now includes learners from Year 8 onwards.⁶¹

The network's [prospectus](#) for 2020/21 states around 10,000 students will participate this academic year, in the following programmes:

Seren Foundation- Years 8-11

1. Online National Conference for Years 9 & 10
2. Study workshops hosted by leading UK universities
3. Subject-specific academic 'stretch and challenge' workshops
4. Masterclasses and tutorials from university partners
5. Links to national essay writing competitions
6. Careers advice – where your choices can lead you
7. High-energy workshops from Positively Mad covering important study topics and skills

Seren Academy- Years 12 and 13

1. Seren Academy National Conference
2. 'Virtual' University visits including to Oxford and Cambridge
3. Direct guidance from university Admissions Tutors including Q&A sessions
4. University admissions test prep sessions including MAT [Mathematics Admissions Test] BMAT [Biomedical Admissions Test], and LNAT [Law National Aptitude Test]

⁵⁹ [Ibid](#), para 30

⁶⁰ Estyn, [Guidance handbook for the inspection of local government education services from September 2019](#), 2019, p25, Estyn, [Supplementary guidance: Inspecting attitudes to learning](#), Autumn 2019, 2019, p4; Estyn, [Guidance handbook for the inspection of secondary schools from September 2019](#), 2019, p22

⁶¹ Welsh Government, [The Seren network: an overview](#)

5. Personal Statement and interview guidance from academics and Admissions Tutors
6. Online mock interview workshops
7. Mentoring and links to Seren Alumni studying at leading universities
8. Opportunity to apply for Seren's exclusive university summer school programmes
9. Participation in the new Seren Award programme.⁶²

Further information can be found in the Senedd Research Service's [The Seren network and Welsh Oxbridge applications](#) (July 2017).

Pupil Development Grants (PDGs)

PDGs provide additional funding to schools to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds (as measured by eligibility for free school meals, being in care, or adopted). They have been in place since 2012/13 and provide additional money to schools based on the number of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM).⁶³

Estyn monitors how schools use the grant and assesses "how well more able and talented deprived learners are supported to develop their full potential".⁶⁴

Following Committee findings in 2018 (see Section 2.4), the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Kirsty Williams, has emphasised that the grant should be used to support all eligible pupils, including MAT ones:

Evidence tells us that we must do more in Wales to identify, support and stretch our more able learners. I want to be clear the PDG supports all eligible learners including our most able learners. To be truly equitable and excellent we must ensure that all pupils are supported to reach their potential.⁶⁵

New Curriculum from 2022

The [Curriculum for Wales framework](#) is intended to be used in Wales from 2022. This requires schools to ensure that their curricula are "suitable for learners of different ages, abilities and aptitudes" and "provide for appropriate learner progression".⁶⁶ It should also provide "stretch and challenge" for:

More able and talented learners and enable them to progress along the continuum of learning at a pace appropriate to them.

Assessment, the new design guidance states, "should focus on identifying each individual learner's strengths, achievements, areas for improvement and, if relevant, any barriers to learning".⁶⁷ Further details are expected on the Curriculum before its launch in 2022.

⁶² Welsh Government, [Seren prospectus: class of 2020/21](#), 2020, pp3, 5

⁶³ Welsh Government, [Education of disadvantaged children](#)

⁶⁴ Welsh Government, [PDG: Essential guidance, 162/2015](#), 2015, p6

⁶⁵ [Kirsty Williams AM to Schools on PDG](#), March 2018, p2

⁶⁶ Welsh Government, [Principles for designing your curriculum](#)

⁶⁷ Welsh Government, [Developing a vision for curriculum design](#)

2.4 Evaluations

Estyn on provision for MAT pupils, 2018

Estyn, the Welsh schools regulator, published [Supporting MAT Pupils](#) in 2018. The report concluded that “in around a third of schools, more able pupils do not achieve as well as they should or use their skills to a level that matches their ability”.⁶⁸ Estyn also said that generally schools “place more emphasis on provision for ‘more able’ pupils than they do for ‘talented’ pupils”.⁶⁹

Estyn also noted the attainment gap at KS2 to KS4:

More able pupils eligible for free school meals do not perform as well as their peers. The gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and those who are not eligible is wider at key stage 3 than at key stage 2 for all subjects in 2017.

[...]

[At KS4] More able pupils eligible for free school meals do not perform as well as other pupils who are more able. The gap in performance in the percentage of pupils gaining five A* to A grades has been around 15% for the past three years.⁷⁰

In 2018 response, the Welsh Government said it would develop a new national approach to supporting MAT learners.⁷¹ The Welsh Education Secretary, Kirsty Williams, said the Government would support a programme to 2021, which would include expanding the Seren network:

I’m making available up to £3 million over the next two years. As a first step, this will support a new national approach for identifying and supporting our more able learners. We will establish a new definition, which will facilitate early identification of those learners, together with new comprehensive guidance. Challenge and support actions through local authorities, consortia, national networks of excellence and Estyn will help schools take this work forward.⁷²

No further guidance on the [2008 Circular](#) has been issued, but the Welsh Government said in 2020 that its MAT strategy and Seren network has supported learners to attend summer schools at universities.⁷³

Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2018

The Welsh Parliament/Senedd Cymru Children, Young People and Education Committee report, [On the money? Targeted funding to improve educational outcomes](#) (2018), examined the effectiveness of Pupil Development Grants (PDGs).

⁶⁸ Estyn, [Supporting more able and talented pupils](#), March 2018, para 2

⁶⁹ [Ibid](#), para 5

⁷⁰ [Ibid](#), pp41, 42

⁷¹ Welsh Government, [Response to the Estyn thematic report](#), June 2018, p3

⁷² Welsh Assembly/Senedd Cymru, [High achievement: Supporting more able and talented learners](#), 27 February 2018, para 309

⁷³ Welsh Government, [Our national mission: update October 2020](#), 13 October 2020; Welsh Government, [Kirsty Williams announces £3 million of support for Wales’ brightest and most talented pupils](#), February 2018

The Committee cited reports that suggested, whilst attainment was improving amongst students in the evaluation period (up to the summer of 2015), PDGs were not being targeted towards both high- and low-attaining pupils in receipt of FSM:

Schools are also blurring disadvantage with low attainment, suggesting that the PDG might be being used to address low attainment generally rather than amongst eFSM [eligible FSM] pupils. Furthermore, there is ambiguity and inconsistency about whether the PDG should be used for all eFSM pupils (including more able and talented eFSM pupils) or for only low attaining eFSM pupils.⁷⁴

HM Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales, Meilyr Rowlands, told the Committee in March 2018 that MAT learners may be missing out on the benefits of PDGs, partly due to issues in identification:

If there is a cohort of pupils who are missing out on this, they are the more able and talented pupils who receive free school meals. There are a number of reasons for this, I think. One of them is that there's still some feeling that less able children should be receiving this grant, children who are underachieving. Schools don't always identify underachievement of those more able children. It seems that they are doing okay, but if they were given more support, they would do even better.

[...]

And the third factor is identifying children who are more able. I think that we have a bit of work to do in that regard.⁷⁵

In response, the Welsh Government said it would update its [guidance](#), previously issued in 2015, but in the interim would "remove the narrow focus on the borderline C/D grade allowing schools to refocus support for more able learners".⁷⁶

Welsh Government evaluation of the Seren network, 2018

The Welsh Government commissioned an [evaluation of 2015/16 pilot of the Seren network](#), which was published in 2018.⁷⁷ Based on interviews with participants, the evaluation stated that "Seren had made a positive contribution to raising aspirations, boosting their [student] confidence and encouraging them to think more ambitiously about their university choice".⁷⁸

However, the report noted that "very little data was available at the time of our evaluation across the Seren hubs to be able to report on the difference that the initiative was having upon the numbers applying to higher tariff institutions generally".⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [On the money? Targeted funding to improve educational outcomes](#), June 2018, p18

⁷⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [14 March 2018](#), paras 15 and 7

⁷⁶ [Cabinet Secretary for Education to Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#), 21 September 2018, R3

⁷⁷ Government Social Research for the Welsh Government, [Seren network evaluation: Final report](#), February 2018

⁷⁸ [Ibid](#), para 10.2

⁷⁹ [Ibid](#), para 10.10

Welsh Government MAT learners, 2015

The Welsh Government previously commissioned an [independent review](#) of provision for MAT learners in 2015. This found that most schools were adhering to the 2008 circular, and “MAT learners in general are provide[d] with appropriate challenge”, though “particularly in secondary schools, [identification of MAT students] tends to be on academic ability rather than the identification and nurturing of talent.”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Welsh Government, [Review to identify more able and talented provision across Wales](#), December 2015, pp35, 36

3. Scotland

3.1 Definition

There is no statutory definition or single term to describe “particularly able or talented” pupils in Scotland. Scotland’s National Improvement Hub describes “highly able learners” as those:

Who are working, or have the potential to work, ahead of other learners their own age. They may be working, or have potential to work, at the higher level across the whole curriculum or in one or more curricular area.⁸¹

The University of Glasgow’s Scottish Network for Able Pupils (SNAP) advises schools to apply their own definition and terminology when identifying able and talented students.⁸²

3.2 Statutory duties

The [Education \(Additional Support for Learning\) \(Scotland\) Act 2004](#), as amended, requires schools to provide additional support for learning (ASL) to a range of pupils, including (the following is not a complete list): children with disabilities, those who have parents in the armed forces and those who are “particularly able or talented”. Children who are being looked after by a local authority or kinship carers are automatically entitled to ASL.⁸³

Accompanying [statutory guidance](#) to the 2004 Act states that those with additional needs should be identified either as part of daily classroom practice or following a request from parents for an assessment.⁸⁴ Resulting support plans can take the form of requesting link courses with further and higher education institutions, developing work skills and an individualised work programme at the school.⁸⁵

3.3 How many pupils are “more able”?

The number of children recorded as “more able” in Scottish primary and secondary schools is shown in the below table. The Scottish Government in 2013 stressed that these figures “do not represent a real increase”, and in 2020 said that the number of pupils identified are likely, in part, to reflect improvements in recording. Students can be classed as eligible for ASL for multiple reasons, meaning some under-reporting may also occur though being listed only under one category.⁸⁶

⁸¹ National Improvement Hub, [A summary of resources relating to highly able learners](#), 21 January 2020

⁸² SNAP, [Definitions](#), accessed 13 November 2020

⁸³ Scottish Government, [Supporting children’s learning: Statutory guidance on the Education \(Additional Support for Learning\) Scotland Act 2004: Code of Practice \[...\] 2017](#), December 2017, para 2

⁸⁴ [Ibid](#), para 33

⁸⁵ [Ibid](#), paras 19, 20, 24, paras 85-6

⁸⁶ Scottish Government, [Pupil Census: Supplementary statistics](#), 31 March 2020; [Pupil census 2019 supplementary tables ‘Background’](#), July 2020; [Pupil census 2013: Supplementary tables ‘Background’](#), 2014

"More able" pupils recorded in Scottish schools, 2010-2019						
	Primary schools			Secondary Schools		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
2010	198	258	456	177	141	318
2011	543	637	1,180	266	236	502
2012	687	811	1,498	484	423	907
2013	No data	No data	No data	392	413	805
2014	716	919	1,635	547	519	1,066
2015	827	1,012	1,839	610	666	1,276
2016	758	973	1,731	696	841	1,537
2017	734	893	1,627	749	898	1,647
2018	621	802	1,423	805	961	1,766
2019	502	739	1,241	970	1,116	2,086

Note: No data was published for primary schools in 2013 for this group.

Source: Scottish Government, [Pupil Census: Supplementary statistics](#), 31 March 2020: 2010-2019 data, Tables 2.7 and 3.7

Male pupils constituted a majority of primary school pupils recorded as "more able" in every year from 2010 to 2019 (60% in 2019) and every year since 2015 in secondary schools (53% in 2019).

3.4 Guidance and best practice

[Statutory guidance](#) on the 2004 Act states that ASL can take the form of applying alternative approaches to learning and teaching, include the employment of specialists, and use of additional resources. Support can be delivered beyond the school site.⁸⁷

Examples of additional support include "a highly able child at the later stages of primary school receiving support to access the secondary mathematics curriculum".⁸⁸

[SNAP](#), based at the University of Glasgow, works with staff to support highly able children aged over 15, and has produced a range of resources to support and direct learning for highly able students. It provides a suggested selection of ideas and organisation for learning:

- Cross-stage setting, such as formation of classes or groups across stages on the basis of attainment;
- Setting projects;
- Pull-out programmes and masterclass; and
- Curriculum compaction.⁸⁹

It has also published [case studies from primary and secondary schools](#).

Scotland's National Improvement Hub has provided a [range of links](#) to suggested learning opportunities and resources.

⁸⁷ [Ibid](#), para 12

⁸⁸ [Ibid](#), para 13

⁸⁹ SNAP, [Ideas for use in schools and classrooms](#)

3.5 Evaluations

Please note that, aside from the SNAP reports, the following evaluations primarily assessed provision for all students eligible for ASL. Those classed as “more able” constitute only a minority of this group: around 2% in the 2019 school census.⁹⁰

Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), 2019

The EIS union published [ASL in Scottish school education](#) in 2019. The report stated that whilst some elements of ASL were working well, particularly the use of learning plans and whole-school approaches to inclusion, there was a lack of staff, resources and professional training to meet the range of full needs ASL pupils have.⁹¹

Independent Review of ALS, 2019

The Scottish Government commissioned an [independent review of ASL](#) in 2019. The June 2020 report argued that there was a “significant discontent between experience and stated aspirations of the legislation and policy”.⁹²

The report noted that highly able learners could potentially see their other needs overlooked:

Intellectual ability may not be matched by emotional maturity and social skills; assumptions [may be] made that high intellectual ability does not need any additional support and encouragement; [students may experience] difficulties in peer relationships; [and] emotional and mental health issues.⁹³

In response, the Scottish Government committed to implement an [Action Plan](#) to involve children, young people and their families in decisions around ASL, to raise the profile of such support, and encourage achievements beyond academic attainment and in exam results.⁹⁴

The Scottish Government is due to report on progress by October 2021. A new code of practice is expected in 2022.⁹⁵

Scottish Government, 2019

The Scottish Government commissioned Social Research to examine [ASL: Research on the experience of children and young people and those that support them](#). The report was published in 2019.

Based on an investigation into student experiences in 18 schools in six areas across Scotland, the research found that most local authorities felt the balance of additional support for learning provision was improving in their areas, and was becoming more personalised and flexible. Several

⁹⁰ Scottish Government, [Pupil Census 2019: Supplementary tables](#), July 2020, Table 3.7

⁹¹ EIS, [ASL in Scottish school education: Exploring the gap between promise and practice](#), May 2019, pp9, 11

⁹² Independent Review, [Review of additional support for learning implementation: Report](#), June 2020, p15

⁹³ [Ibid](#), p136-7

⁹⁴ Scottish Government, [Improving additional support for learning](#), 21 October 2020; Scottish Government, [Additional support for learning: Action plan](#), 21 October 2020

⁹⁵ Scottish Government, [Additional support for learning: Action plan](#), 21 October 2020, para 1.1.4

highlighted that there was a lack of resource, particularly in mainstream schools.⁹⁶

Education and Skills Committee, 2017-19

The Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee published a report on [Additional Support Needs in School Education](#) in 2017, and held follow up sessions in 2019.

In 2017, the Committee noted the lack of awareness amongst parents of ASL, and the risk that parents from areas of deprivation may have had fewer opportunities to receive advice and support.⁹⁷ Whilst noting progress made in such children leaving school to a "positive destination" and in their exam performance, the Committee questioned whether resources were sufficient to support all those with additional support needs.⁹⁸

In 2019, the Committee said that "the issues raised by parents and teachers who submitted to the last inquiry would appear to be abiding issues that remain today".⁹⁹

In response, the Scottish Government commissioned a report into experiences of ASL (see above).¹⁰⁰

Scottish Network for Able Pupils (SNAP), 2011 & 2014

SNAP's [We count too: Highly able pupils in Scottish schools](#) (2014) found that, amongst thirteen surveyed authorities, there was no common nationally-applied definition of highly able pupils.¹⁰¹ It found a range of extra-curricular activities were on offer, but "very few" were aimed specifically at pupils with high ability, though "the opportunities on offer were clearly appropriate for some highly able pupils".¹⁰²

Surveying 2009-2012 data, SNAP found that the number of pupils identified as "highly able" varied across council areas.¹⁰³ Whilst in 2009, 6 out of 32 authorities gave a nil return in relation to highly able pupils, all 32 authorities reported having highly able pupils who required additional support in 2012.¹⁰⁴

SNAP also published [Highly able children in the early years: A report of practice in nurseries in Scotland](#) (2011), based on case studies of eight nurseries.

⁹⁶ Social Research for the Scottish Government, [ASL: Research on the experience of children and young people and those that support them](#), 2019, para 7.4

⁹⁷ Education and Skills Committee, [How is additional support for learning working in practice?](#), SP 140, May 2017, pp25, 26

⁹⁸ [Ibid](#), pp15, 17

⁹⁹ Education and Skills Committee, [Committee to John Swinney MSP](#), 9 April 2019, p2

¹⁰⁰ Scottish Government, [Additional support for learning: Research on the experience of children and young people and those that support them](#), March 2019, p5

¹⁰¹ SNAP, [We count too](#), 2014, p5

¹⁰² [Ibid](#), p11

¹⁰³ [Ibid](#), p14

¹⁰⁴ [Ibid](#), p15

4. Northern Ireland

4.1 Definition

[NI Direct](#) defines “gifted and talented children” in the following terms:

'Gifted and talented' describes children with the ability or potential to develop significantly ahead of their peers:

- 'Gifted' learners are those with abilities in one or more academic subjects, such as maths or English
- 'Talented' learners are those who have practical skills in areas such as sport, music, design or creative and performing arts

Skills and attributes such as leadership, decision-making and organisation may also be taken into account.¹⁰⁵

4.2 Guidance

A school has a responsibility to meet the educational needs of all their pupils, and teachers should set tasks that take account of the varying abilities of children. Parents can discuss their child's needs with their teacher or school principal.¹⁰⁶

Guidance was published by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to support the identification and teaching of gifted and talented learners. This is no longer on the [CCEA's website](#), but an archived version can be found here: CCEA, [Gifted and Talented](#).

The CCEA's current curriculum guidance for pre-school education states that, “when planning, staff should also take account of any gifted children”.¹⁰⁷

At KS3, CCEA guidance states, the needs of all pupils, including “gifted and talented students whose attainment significantly exceeds what is expected at a particular key stage”, should, “as far as possible”, be taken into account when the curriculum and assessments are being planned.¹⁰⁸

At KS4, CCEA guidance states schools should use assessment data to “identify gifted and talented learners who require support to achieve their full potential” and intervene when their performance is lower than expected.¹⁰⁹

Inspections

A [self-evaluation framework](#) published by the Education and Training Inspectorate Northern Ireland (ETINI) states that governors of nursery, primary, secondary and special schools should ensure that there is an appropriately resourced provision for learners, including the gifted and

¹⁰⁵ NI Direct, [Supporting gifted and talented children](#), accessed 16 November 2020

¹⁰⁶ NI Direct, [Supporting gifted and talented children](#), accessed 16 November 2020

¹⁰⁷ CCEA, [Pre-school guidance](#), 2018, p15

¹⁰⁸ CCEA, [The statutory curriculum at KS3: Rationale and Detail](#), 2007, p23

¹⁰⁹ CCEA, [Guidance on teaching, learning and assessment at KS4](#), 2019, pp79, 82-3

talented.¹¹⁰ This framework is used to evaluate the quality of the strategic and corporate work of the Board of Governors.¹¹¹

4.3 Potential support

The NI Direct page, [Supporting gifted and talented children](#), provides examples of potential steps schools can take to support a gifted or talented learner, including:

- Setting tasks that take account of the varying abilities of children;
- Providing greater challenges in lessons;
- Offering further opportunities for them to develop their gifts or talents outside of the normal timetable;
- If the child is in primary school and shows they have the ability to fully take part in the next school year group, the principal can consider moving the child into that group (though emotional and social development should also be taken into account); and
- The Board of Governors of a primary school can decide, with the agreement of the parent and the school's principal, that the child can transfer to a post-primary school a year earlier than normal.¹¹²

The NI Executive currently has a range of programmes designed to support children from deprived backgrounds reach their full potential. Further information can be found in the Northern Ireland Research Service's [Every child deserves a real chance in life: A renewed government focus on solving educational underachievement in Northern Ireland?](#) (October 2020).

4.4 Evaluations

Patricia McGrath, in the Journal Gifted Education International, in 2018 [surveyed evidence](#) on the education of gifted students in Northern Ireland. Original evidence for the article focused on children in MENSA, and concluded:

Changes have been introduced recently by the government in Northern Ireland to the grading system for General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE), which will help gifted students – the changes have already started for subjects English and mathematics in some schools [...]

However, with the lack of a legal basis for providing for gifted students, it is unlikely that any change will take place that will benefit gifted students in the near future in Northern Ireland.¹¹³

In Northern Ireland, the GCSE grading system changed from letter (A*-G) to Number (9-1) grades from the summer of 2017.¹¹⁴

CCEA had previously published an evaluation in 2006, entitled [Gifted and talented children in \(and out\) of the classroom](#).

¹¹⁰ ETINI, [Inspection and self-evaluation framework](#), September 2017, p7

¹¹¹ ETINI, [Governance](#), accessed 16 November 2020

¹¹² NI Direct, [Supporting gifted and talented children](#), accessed 16 November 2020

¹¹³ Patricia McGrath, 'Education in Northern Ireland: Does it meet the needs of gifted students?', Gifted Education International, 2018

¹¹⁴ CCEA, [A guide to changes in GCSE grading](#)

5. Evaluations of school strategies and UK performance

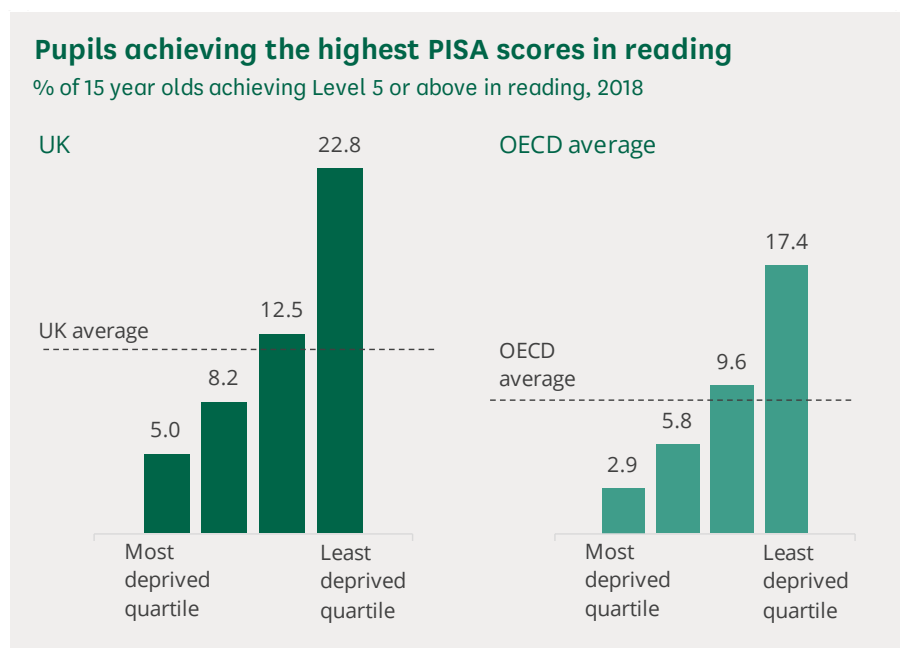
5.1 How does the UK's attainment gap compare internationally?

PISA scores, 2018

[PISA](#) is a triennial international survey which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the knowledge of a sample of 15-year-old students. The assessment focuses on reading, maths and science. The most recent available test scores are from 2018. In this year additional data about the highest achieving pupils and their socio-economic background was published for reading scores only.

In 2018, around 12% of 15 year olds in the UK were “top performers in reading”.¹¹⁵ This means that they achieved Level 5 or above in reading, (the highest is [level six](#)). Out of 36 participating countries, the UK ranked 11th highest on this measure. The OECD average (in this case known as the OECD 36-a average) was around 9%.

In 2018, around 23% of the most advantaged¹¹⁶ students in the UK were top performers in reading compared to 5% of disadvantaged students. This meant the attainment gap was around 18 percentage points, slightly wider than the OECD average of around 14 percentage points.



Source: [PISA 2018](#), OECD (Student' socio-economic status, [Table II.B1.2.6](#))

¹¹⁵ [PISA 2018](#), OECD (Table II.B1.2.6)

¹¹⁶ Pupils are divided into quartiles using the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status known as ESCS. The least deprived pupils are in the top ESCS quartile.

The survey also found that in the UK, “low- and high-performing students were clustered in certain schools less often compared to the OECD average”.¹¹⁷

In addition, the report noted that disadvantaged high achieving students, had “lower ambitions” than their more advantaged peers with similar academic achievement. About one in three high achieving disadvantaged students in the UK did not expect to complete tertiary education. This compared to fewer than one in ten high achieving advantaged students.¹¹⁸

Sutton Trust’s International comparisons, 2017

The Sutton Trust’s [Global Gaps](#) (2017) assessed the gap in 2015 PISA scores between the top-performing pupils from low and high socio-economic backgrounds. Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores measure 15-year-old school pupils’ performance in reading, science and mathematics.¹¹⁹

“High achievement” was defined as the 90th percentile of the PISA test score distribution within each country (being the score that a child would need to achieve to make it into the top 10% of children within that country).¹²⁰

Variation between UK nations:

- 1 The report found that whilst **England** had a comparatively high performance in science amongst the most able, it had a comparatively large socio-economic gap in science and reading between the most able pupils from high- and low- income backgrounds.
- 2 **Wales** was found to have a “comparatively small gap” between most able advantaged and disadvantaged pupils, but, the report said, this was “mainly being driven by the weak absolute performance of the top socio-economic group and, with the difference remaining at 2 years of schooling, is still substantial”.
- 3 **Northern Ireland** was found to have the smallest gap of the surveyed OECD countries in the three subjects—at two years of schooling between the most able pupils from better-off and poor backgrounds. However, the report noted that Northern Ireland is in the bottom quarter of industrialised countries for academically able pupils’ performance in mathematics.
- 4 **Scotland**, the report said, stood around the OECD median in science and was “below the median OECD country in reading and mathematics”. The gap, the Trust said, “between able advantaged and disadvantaged children does not stand out as particularly large or small relative to other industrialised countries”.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ [PISA 2018](#), OECD ([UK country note](#)), p5

¹¹⁸ [PISA 2018](#), OECD ([UK country note](#)), p5

¹¹⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), [PISA](#)

¹²⁰ Sutton Trust, [Global gaps: comparing socio-economic gaps in the performance of highly able UK pupils internationally](#), February 2017, p8

¹²¹ [Ibid](#), pp30-2

Variation by Gender:

In England, the performance gap is larger in respect to highly able female students compared to males:

[In **science**] The gap is particularly big for girls: bright but poor girls lag 3 years behind bright but better-off girls in science in England. This is 8 months greater than the equivalent gap for boys.

[...]

The socio-economic gap in **reading** for bright girls in England is 3 years of schooling, 9 months greater than that for boys.¹²²

The Trust noted that one reason for the comparatively large socio-economic gap in science and reading between the most able girls was the “exceptionally strong performance of England’s able girls from advantaged socio-economic homes”.¹²³

Variation by socio-economic group:

- In **Science**, the socioeconomic gap amongst high-achieving pupils in England reached its peak in 2009, standing at 3 years and six months of schooling (106 test points). The gap has subsequently declined to around 88 test points in 2012 and 82 points in 2015. The gap had also narrowed in other parts of the UK, but, the report noted, this was “primarily due to a decline in the performance amongst the most able pupils from more affluent backgrounds”.¹²⁴
- In **mathematics**, the gap in performance between the highest-achieving pupils from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds in England and Scotland are 2 years and 8 months ahead of their counterparts in the least advantaged households in 2015 (at the OECD median). Wales had the smallest gap, but, the report noted, this was due to “weak mathematics performance of high socio-economic status pupils in Wales”.¹²⁵
- In **reading skills**, high-achieving pupils from the most advantaged backgrounds in England were two years and eight months (80 points) ahead of their counterparts in the least advantaged households in 2015. Scotland had a gap of 65 point, whilst Northern Ireland and Wales had smaller gaps at two years of schooling (60 test points) or less.¹²⁶

5.2 Evaluations of best practice

This section summarises a short selection of recent research on what strategies can potentially be applied within schools to support the “most able” students. All three reports cited below have noted there is currently little evidence on how best to support highly able students. They also note it is often difficult to directly attribute gains in academic

¹²² [Ibid](#), pp4, 5

¹²³ [Ibid](#), p30

¹²⁴ [Ibid](#), p14

¹²⁵ [Ibid](#), p17

¹²⁶ [Ibid](#), p24

progress to specific activities, and the lack of a common definition of “gifted” or “most able” limits the conclusions that may be drawn.

Sutton Trust, 2018

The Sutton Trust’s [Potential for success](#) (2018) argued that “mentoring and tutoring programmes, and accelerated learning, are both interventions which are likely to benefit the highly able”, though further research is required to confirm this.¹²⁷

Accelerated learning can take the form of setting and streaming in schools, or for differentiating within a mixed-ability class.

The Trust report cited a literature review by the Education Endowment Foundation, which examined six analyses on the **impact of setting and streaming**.¹²⁸ This argued that “setting and streaming has a very small negative impact for low and mid-range attaining learners, and a very small positive impact for higher attaining pupils”. Factors the Trust cited for this included teachers not correctly planning work for the abilities of students within their classes, over-compensation of lower sets, competition amongst teachers to take the top set classes, and undermining of lower-attainers confidence.¹²⁹ Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were also found to be at greater risk of misallocation, widening educational divides.¹³⁰

There was “some evidence”, the Sutton Trust report argued, for **mentoring and tutoring programmes** helping to raise aspirations and attainment, though most of the evidence comes from the United States. The trust cited the AimHigher programme in Kent and Medway that, in 2006-8, found over 80% of students who had an Aimhigher mentor (an older student, often at university) achieved higher total GCSE points than their predicted estimates at Year 9. This compared to 65% of non Aimhigher students in the same area with similar predicted scores to the analysis group.¹³¹

Evaluations of the impact of **extra curricula activities** on the highly-able were found by the Trust in its 2018 report to also be lacking.¹³² A later [report](#) for the Social Mobility Commission in 2019, undertaken by the University of Bath, reported that academic research had found participation to have a positive impact on educational attainment, school attendance and aspirations (though the report authors noted the lack of UK-specific research on the topic).¹³³

¹²⁷ Sutton Trust, [Potential for success](#), 2018, p4

¹²⁸ [Ibid](#), pp16-17

¹²⁹ [Ibid](#), p17

¹³⁰ Education Endowment Foundation, [Setting or streaming](#), 2018, pp1, 4-5; L. Archer et al, [The symbolic violence of setting: A Bourdieusian analysis of mixed methods data on secondary school students' views about setting](#), *British Educational Research Journal*, 44, 2018, pp119-40

¹³¹ Sutton Trust, [Potential for success](#), p18; J. Moore and F. Dunworth, [Review of evidence from Aimhigher Area partnerships of the impact of Aimhigher](#), 2011, p13

¹³² Sutton Trust, [Potential for success](#), 2018, p19

¹³³ University of Bath for the Social Mobility Commission, [An unequal playing field: Extra-curricular activities, soft skills and social mobility](#), 2019, pp14-18

The Sutton Trust also noted that **family support** can be important for a student's attainment, particularly if their parents think it is likely their child will go onto higher education.¹³⁴

Centre for Education Economics, 2018

The Centre for Education Economics published a literature review, [What works in gifted education?](#), in 2018, which argued, citing studies in Dutch and American schools, that individualised models of enrichment were the "most promising avenue" for supporting gifted children, as opposed to traditional structured learning.¹³⁵

In the Dutch case, highly-able students were allowed to pursue their own self-selected projects during the school year, alongside their classroom learning. The authors found that "pupils who just qualified for the programme perform radically better in secondary school than pupils who just missed out. The effect size amounts to the equivalent of about 35 PISA points on average". Students were also more likely to increase the number of science and mathematics subjects they took.¹³⁶

University of Warwick report for the DfE, 2018

The University of Warwick's [Research to understand successful approaches to supporting the most academic able disadvantage group](#) (2018) examined what secondary schools across England were doing in 2017/18 to support attainment amongst the group from KS2 to KS4.

The authors stressed that further research was needed to validate their research, which was based on a scoping survey of over 400 secondary schools, followed by telephone interviews with 21, and detailed case study work in three schools.¹³⁷

The research argued that a combination of activities, including academic extension; cultural enrichment; personal development; removal of financial barriers to achievement; working with parents and external organisations (such as universities); and monitoring and evaluation made a positive impact. A summary of these factors can be found in the table on the following page.

Surveys with schools noted an awareness of the complexity in **identifying the "most able"** and that underachievement among potentially very able pupils could be overlooked during primary school, which was reflected in the multiple methods schools used to identify pupils.¹³⁸

The 21 schools identified as most successful in the sample in supporting the most able disadvantaged students, based on Progress 8 scores, had

¹³⁴ Sutton Trust, [Potential for success](#), 2018, p20

¹³⁵ Centre for Education Economics, [What works in gifted education?](#), 2018, pp3, 24-5

¹³⁶ [Ibid](#), p18 and see A. Booiij, F. Haan and E. Plug, [Enriching students pays off: Evidence from an individualised gifted and talented program in secondary education](#), IZA Discussion Paper, February 2016, and [Can gifted and talented education raise the academic achievement of all high-achieving students?](#), June 2017

¹³⁷ University of Warwick for Government Social Research/DfE, [Research to understand successful approaches to supporting the most academic able disadvantage group](#), 2018, p8

¹³⁸ [Ibid](#), p29

a **strategic commitment to academic progress and achievement**, which took the form of a named senior leader reviewing practice, and targeted pastoral support, teacher training and lesson planning.¹³⁹

Risk and protective factors for academic success of able disadvantaged pupils	
Protective factors	Risk Factors
Pupil	
High prior attainment at KS2	Falling behind against targets
Achievement at or above targets	Attendance issues
Interested in learning	Behavioural issues
Has particular interests	Low aspirations for post-Year 11
Having books, equipment, uniform etc.	Lack of confidence, self-esteem
High attendance	
Well behaved	
School culture	
High quality teaching	Difficulty recruiting high quality teachers
Ethos of high achievement	Does not understand the needs of disadvantaged, academically able pupils
Supportive interventions to address underachievement	
Culture of positive behaviour	
Support for emotional, psychological and social	
Opportunities to develop interests outside the classroom	
Family circumstances	
Parental support of school with value placed on educational success	Limited experience of the world beyond the immediate locality
Parental encouragement to participate in positive activities outside school	Lack of parental support for educational success at home (may be a lack of understanding of how to do this)
	Limited experience of belonging to out of school clubs or community associations
	Limited experience of cultural activities
	Lack of parental attention
	Material poverty
	Affected by deprivation in community environment
School's wider community (partnerships)	
School staff meet with parents of able disadvantaged pupils	Limited contact between parents of able disadvantaged pupils and school staff
School links in with world beyond school (e.g. universities, employers, creatives, arts and sporting activities)	Limited contact between school and world beyond school around broadening horizons
Universities, employers and others reach out to support schools in these efforts	
Parents encourage and enable pupil's efforts	

Source: Adapted from University of Warwick/ Government Social Research, [Research to understand successful approaches to supporting the most academic able disadvantage group](#), 2018, pp20-1

Targeted programmes included extra-curricular activities, curriculum pathways (e.g. all high achieving pupils had to take the subjects that will result in the EBacc), advice on GCSE and A-level subject choices and

¹³⁹ [Ibid.](#), pp32-3

weekly academic mentoring.¹⁴⁰ Examples of **removing financial barriers** included supporting the cost of travel to visit universities, covering entrance fees for certain university courses, the cost of books or participation in national competitions.¹⁴¹

5.3 When should interventions be targeted?

The question of when high-achieving children from low-income families are overtaken in academic attainment by low-achieving children from higher-income families has been much debated. A selection of research is cited below.

Some research has suggested that high-achieving children from low income households fall behind low-achieving children from high income households around the age of five, whilst other research has argued that this happens at a later stage, between the ages of seven and sixteen.¹⁴²

The Sutton Trust's [Missing Talent](#) (2015) found that that disadvantaged pupils who attained in the top 10% at the end of primary school were much less likely than their more advantaged peers to achieve highly at the end of Key Stage 4. This included 36% of highly able boys in receipt of free school meals.¹⁴³

[Academic Research](#) published in 2017 argued that secondary school, particularly between the ages 11 and 14, is the "critical period to intervene to prevent poor children from falling behind". The authors identified growing divides from KS1 to KS4:¹⁴⁴

Large socio-economic differences are observed in the earliest achievement tests at age 7 with a 16.1 percentile achievement gap between the most and least deprived pupils at Key Stage 1.

At Key Stage 2, Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 these gaps widen to 22.1, 27.4 and 28.9 percentiles respectively.¹⁴⁵

The authors noted that the largest changes in performance were experienced by initially high-achieving children from low-income households and the initially low achieving children from high-income households, particularly between KS2 and KS4.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ [Ibid.](#), pp34-8

¹⁴¹ [Ibid.](#), p40

¹⁴² L. Feinstein, [Inequality in the early cognitive development of British children in the 1970 cohort](#), *Economica*, 70, 2003, and the response in J. Jerrim and A. Vignoles, [Social mobility, regression to the mean and the cognitive development of high ability children from disadvantaged homes](#), Royal Statistical Society, 2012; A. Goodman and P. Gregg, eds, *Poorer children's education attainment: How important are attitudes and behaviour?*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010, p35; J. Jerrim for the Sutton Trust, [Global gaps: Comparing socio-economic gaps in the performance of highly-able UK pupils internationally](#), February 2017; Education Endowment Foundation, [The attainment gap, 2017](#), 2018, p2

¹⁴³ Sutton Trust, [Missing Talent](#), 2015.

¹⁴⁴ C. Crawford, L. Macmillan and A. Vignoles, [When and why do initially high-achieving poor children fall behind?](#), *Oxford Review of Education*, 43, 2016, pp88-108

¹⁴⁵ [Ibid.](#), p16

¹⁴⁶ [Ibid.](#), p17

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