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Pocket Watch – Tackling disadvantage

Introduction

The Government has made closing the attainment gap between the most and the least disadvantaged learners one of the primary drivers of its education reforms. As Michael Gove recently put it: *"a relentless focus on closing the gap between the poorest students and their peers has been at the heart of everything we've done in Government."* Yet the last few weeks have seen a series of Reports come out suggesting disadvantage is as entrenched as ever while a new Alliance has been set up to help combat gaps in achievement between different social groups. It's a reminder, if one were needed, that in the words of the Chief Inspector in Ofsted's current Annual Report: *"the story of our schools and colleges is a story of two nations."*

What have these latest Reports been saying?

There have been three major Reports out recently each broaching things from a slightly different angle. The Report from the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission for instance looked at the familiar issue of what happens to young people between Key Stages 2 and 4. It found that compared to their more advantaged peers, many of the more disadvantaged fail to make the same leap in progress. *"Of almost 8,000 disadvantaged students who achieved top grades in English and maths standardised tests at age 11, only 900 went on to study at an elite university."* It led the Report to conclude that young talent was being wasted on *"an industrial scale."* The Education Committee recently investigated performance in another area of longstanding concern, white working class children, and pretty much reached a similar conclusion: *"the problem of poor, white British under achievement is real and the gap between those children and their better off class mates starts in their earliest school years and then widens as they get older."* The Social Market Foundation in another Report just out highlighted the benefits that can accrue from being able to afford private education: *"between the ages of 26 and 42, someone attending independent school will earn on average £193,700 more than someone attending a state school."* It all adds up to some long standing but real concerns.

So what's being proposed as remedies?

This is where it gets a bit trickier. The Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) and the Education Trust CfBT have both looked at the great strides made by London Schools particularly in disadvantaged areas but have emerged with contrasting conclusions. The IFS believe *"improvements in London seem more likely to have primarily resulted from changes occurring in the late 1990s such as the National Strategies than from recent initiatives such as the London Challenge or the Academies Programme."* CfBT, however, point to *"four key school improvement interventions, London Challenge, Teach First, the Academies Programme and improved support from local authorities."* The Education Committee called for better deployment of teachers, closer scrutiny by Ofsted of the impact of the pupil premium and even a longer school day. The Sutton Trust, which commissioned the Social Market Foundation Report called for an extension of their Open Access scheme whereby Government subsidises some or all of the fees of disadvantaged pupils attending participating independent schools. It's an idea that has been around for some time, remember Assisted Places of the 1980s, and would potentially add £200m+ to the current £1.8bn pupil premium but currently policy interest is focused on assessing the impact of the pupil premium and re-invigorating the locally driven Challenge model used in London, the Midlands and elsewhere to raise performance.

Steve Besley

Head of Policy (UK and International)



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