

THE INDEPENDENT INQUIRY INTO

White Working Class Educational Outcomes

June 2026

AUTHORED BY
Katie Carr · Ed Dorrell
Dr Sally Burtonshaw · Sarah Anderson
Public First

FUNDED BY
The Christopher &
Henry Oldfield Trust

COMMISSIONED BY
Star Academies

Acknowledgements

The Independent Inquiry into White Working Class Educational Outcomes was commissioned by Star Academies and generously funded by The Christopher and Henry Oldfield Trust. The Inquiry would like to thank both organisations for their support, commitment and belief in the importance of this work.

The Inquiry would also like to thank Public First for leading the research programme that underpins this publication, alongside the UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities for conducting the new analysis of administrative data contained in this report.

We are deeply grateful to our co-chairs, Sir Hamid Patel CBE and Baroness Estelle Morris, and to all members of the Inquiry Panel for the time, expertise, challenge and leadership they brought to this work throughout the process.

Most importantly, we would like to thank the thousands of pupils, parents, teachers, school and college leaders, employers, researchers, charities, community organisations and wider contributors who gave evidence to the Inquiry, participated in focus groups and immersive visits, submitted written evidence, and shared their experiences and perspectives with honesty and generosity. Their contributions shaped every aspect of this report.

This Inquiry was established because too many white working class children and young people feel unseen within the education system and uncertain about their future. We hope this report contributes to a broader national effort to ensure that every child feels recognised, valued and able to succeed.



The Christopher and
Henry Oldfield Trust

Contents

Foreword	04
Executive Summary	06
Introduction	10
Our Panel	16
Our Research Programme	18
Our Findings	22
The Experience of Growing Up White Working Class	28
Our Vision for Change	52
Our Recommendations	54
Conclusion	72

Foreword

Education has long been one of this country's greatest sources of hope and opportunity. At its best, it changes lives, strengthens communities and opens doors that might otherwise remain closed.

We have both spent much of our lives working in and around education because we believe deeply in its transformational power. We have seen the impact that succeeding in education can have on the lives of young people: it broadens their choice of pathways, boosts their confidence, and inspires optimism. It fosters interests, passions and a love of learning that can stay with them throughout their lives.

But despite the undoubted improvements in our education system, we can both recall too many young people for whom success was elusive. Their outcomes were disappointing despite the keen interest and dedicated effort of their teachers who trialled approaches designed to raise attainment.

Indeed, the past thirty years have seen a myriad of initiatives targeted on 'closing the gap', and whilst some have yielded improvements, none has significantly and sustainably boosted the performance of white working class children.

Doing more of the same is unlikely to solve the problem.

What has been missing is sustained, coordinated action at sufficient scale to change outcomes. The real test of this Inquiry will not be whether experts think it is interesting, or if it garners a few big headlines, but whether it helps catalyse the collective action needed to improve the life chances of our most disadvantaged young people.

Data shows starkly that a key characteristic of the attainment gap is social class; the family a child is born into is still the greatest predictor of their success. The Inquiry was set up to look more closely at this issue and to contribute to the debate about what we need to do differently to redress inequality.

Our Inquiry team has carried out research which gives us a rich picture of what is happening. Most importantly, they have talked with children, parents, teachers and the wider community to gain a better understanding of what lies beneath the statistics.

We heard repeatedly a feeling that education isn't working for them in the way it should. We heard from young people who feel disengaged from school and from parents who no longer trust the long-established assertion that education will lead to stability, opportunity or a better life for their children. We heard from teachers and leaders working tirelessly in very difficult circumstances, often carrying exacting responsibilities that far exceed those we can reasonably expect to be carried out by schools alone.

“This report is not intended to be a counsel of despair, but rather a call to action.”

Most importantly, we heard a profound sense that too many white working class children and young people feel that educational success is something that happens for other people, rather than for them.

The evidence gathered through this Inquiry shows that white working class educational underachievement is neither a new issue nor a simple one. It cannot be explained away by low aspiration or lack of effort. Nor can it be solved by schools alone. The challenges described throughout this report are deeply rooted in long-term economic change, place-based inequality and weakening trust in institutions. Furthermore, there is often a misalignment between the education system and the communities it services.

The task is therefore twofold: education must become relevant, trusted and responsive to communities, and communities must be supported to engage with the opportunities education can provide.

This Inquiry also found that the underachievement of white working class children is not inevitable. Across the country, a number of schools, colleges and communities are turning the tide. We met teachers and leaders creating cultures of high expectation, belonging and care. We saw young

people thriving when education felt relevant and connected to their lives and futures. We heard repeatedly that when children feel recognised, supported and believed in, they succeed.

All this matters because this report is not intended to be a counsel of despair, but rather a call to action.

“We were struck by the pride, humour, resilience and strong sense of solidarity within many white working class communities.”

Throughout this Inquiry, we were struck by the pride, humour, resilience and strong sense of solidarity within many white working class communities. Parents want better lives for their children and place a high value on success. The problem is not a lack of aspiration, but a combination of structural barriers, opportunity gaps, trust, confidence and differing experiences of the education system.

Too often, conversations about socioeconomic inequality focus only on deficit and decline. But the task ahead is not to diminish the communities who contributed to this Inquiry or their identity; it is to build an education system that better recognises, values and builds upon the strengths already within them.

Improving outcomes for white working class children and young people will require sustained national effort over many years. It needs us to face up to the scale of the challenge and to believe that change is possible. Responsibility cannot sit with schools alone. Government, employers, colleges, universities, trusts, community organisations, families and wider society all have a role to play. We hope this report will provide a strong foundation and shared purpose for the joint work ahead to rebuild confidence that education remains a meaningful route to dignity, opportunity and a good life.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who spoke with the Inquiry team, particularly the children, families, teachers and communities who shared their experiences so openly and honestly and made such a valuable contribution to our evidence base.

The challenge set out in this report is significant. But so too is the opportunity. Every child in this country deserves to feel that education is for them, that their future matters, and that success is achievable regardless of where they come from. That is the unfaltering ambition which underpins this Inquiry and the recommendations that follow.



Estelle Morris

Baroness Estelle Morris



Hamid Patel

Sir Hamid Patel CBE

Executive Summary

The Independent Inquiry into White Working Class Educational Outcomes was established in response to growing concern about the scale and persistence of educational underachievement amongst white working class children and young people in England.

Today, disadvantaged white British pupils experience some of the weakest educational outcomes in the country across all stages of education. The Inquiry describes this as the white working class disadvantage gap: the persistent gap in educational attainment between disadvantaged white British pupils and their peers.

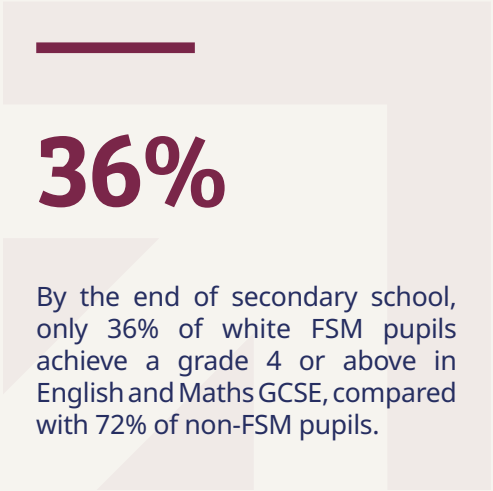
This is a large group of children and young people. White British pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) make up around 15% of the total school population in England², although the true scale of white working class disadvantage is likely to be substantially larger than this measure alone captures.

The Inquiry's analysis found that educational gaps emerge early and widen throughout childhood and adolescence. By the end of secondary school, only 36% of white British FSM pupils achieve a grade 4 or above in English and Maths GCSE, compared with 72% of non-FSM pupils¹. These patterns have remained remarkably consistent over time.

However, this Inquiry found that white working class educational underachievement is not simply a question of attainment. Throughout the research, a much broader picture emerged of children and young people experiencing declining engagement with education, weakening confidence in future opportunity, and a growing sense that the education system is not designed for people like them.

The Inquiry's research programme combined new analysis of educational data with large-scale polling, focus groups, immersive community, school and college visits, expert evidence sessions, roundtables, and written evidence. It involved engagement with thousands of pupils, parents, teachers, leaders, employers and community organisations across England.

“Disadvantaged white British pupils experience some of the weakest educational outcomes in the country across all stages of education.”



Five major findings emerged:

- 01 The education system is not set up to serve white working class children and families.**
- 02 White working class communities and the education system are misaligned in how they define success and the purpose of education.**
- 03 White working class families have a poorer experience of the school system than their peers.**
- 04 Transitions are key pressure points where gaps widen and engagement declines for white working class young people.**
- 05 White working class educational outcomes are shaped by both the education system, and wider community and economic conditions.**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the scale of these challenges, the Inquiry also found strong evidence that outcomes are not fixed. Across England, there are a number of schools and colleges achieving relatively good outcomes for white working class children and young people through highly relational and ambitious approaches built around strong leadership, high expectations, enriching experiences, and excellent teaching. The Inquiry therefore rejects the idea that underachievement amongst white working class pupils is inevitable.

This report sets out a long-term vision for change and a set of recommendations intended to form the foundations of a decade-long national effort to close the white working class disadvantage gap.

The Inquiry is clear that there is no single policy or institution capable of resolving these challenges alone. Improving outcomes for white working class children and young people will require long-term commitment and coordinated action across government, schools, colleges, employers, charities, civic institutions, communities and families themselves.

It will also require us to move beyond a conversation focused solely on deficit and underachievement. Throughout this work, white working class children, families and communities spoke powerfully about pride, humour, belonging, identity and the importance of place and community within their lives. The task ahead is not to diminish these communities, but to build an education system that better recognises, values and builds upon the strengths already within them.

The challenge described in this report is significant, but so too is the opportunity. No child in England should grow up feeling that education is for other people, but not for them.

“The Inquiry rejects the idea that underachievement amongst white working class pupils is inevitable.”

 This Inquiry recommends:

Across the system

- 1 Improving how the system defines and prioritises white working class educational outcomes.
- 2 Delivering a more inclusive approach to SEND and additional needs.
- 3 Developing a stronger national response to rising mental health challenges and excessive screen use.
- 4 Repositioning education as a shared endeavour between schools and families.
- 5 Delivering a properly funded enrichment entitlement.

Early and primary education

- 1 Building a stronger national network of Best Start Family Hubs.
- 2 Extending 30 hours’ free childcare to all disadvantaged families not currently eligible.
- 3 Strengthening transition into primary school and support for families.
- 4 Making reading fluency a national priority for white working class children.

Secondary education

- 1 Reforming the transition from primary to secondary school.
- 2 Reprioritising Key Stage 3 as a critical phase of secondary education.
- 3 Strengthening curriculum delivery at Key Stage 4.
- 4 Developing high-quality vocational and applied pathways at Key Stage 4.
- 5 Improving careers education in schools and making learning feel more relevant to pupils’ futures.
- 6 Ensuring every young person leaves school or college with a clear destination and is prepared for the transition.
- 7 Widening access to the highest performing schools.

Tertiary education

- 1 Empowering FE colleges to be high-quality, local engines of progression.
- 2 Massively expanding apprenticeship opportunities in white working class communities.
- 3 Reimagining higher education and Level 4+ pathways to prioritise flexibility, locality and work.
- 4 Reducing the financial risks associated with further and higher study.
- 5 Introducing free access to local public transport for all under 21s.

Teachers

- 1 Building local teacher pipelines through a reformed Teacher Degree Apprenticeship.
- 2 More targeting of existing teacher recruitment and retention support to the communities facing the greatest workforce challenges.
- 3 Reviewing training and development to better reflect the realities of teaching in white working class communities.

Introduction

About white working class educational outcomes

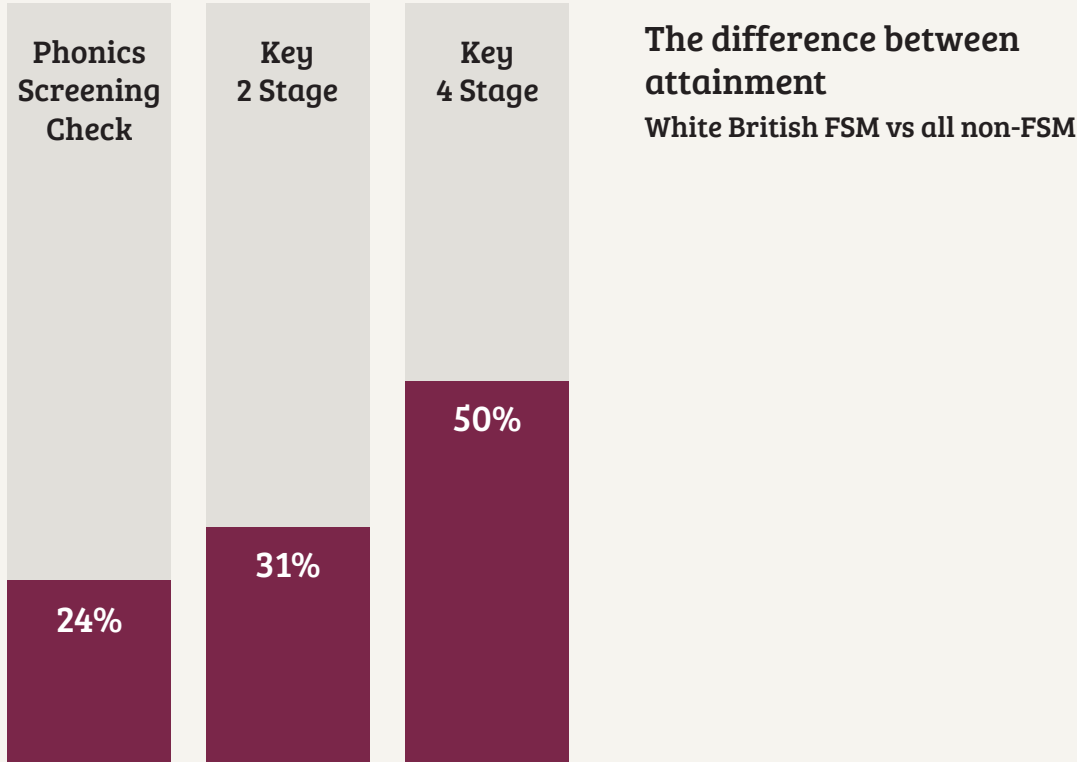
There are 8.45 million pupils in schools in England. 2.17 million of these are known to be eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). Of these pupils, more than half – 1.25 million – are white British. White British pupils known to be eligible for FSM therefore make up around 15% of the total school population in England².

Over the last two decades, England has made significant progress in improving educational outcomes for many groups. However, white British FSM pupils now experience some of the weakest educational outcomes in the country across all stages of education, including being half as likely to secure at least a grade 4 in their English and Maths GCSEs. Alan Milburn’s interim report, *Young people and work*³, identifies these qualifications as “one of the best defences against a young person becoming NEET”.

The Inquiry describes this as the white working class disadvantage gap: the persistent gap in educational attainment between white working class pupils and their peers.

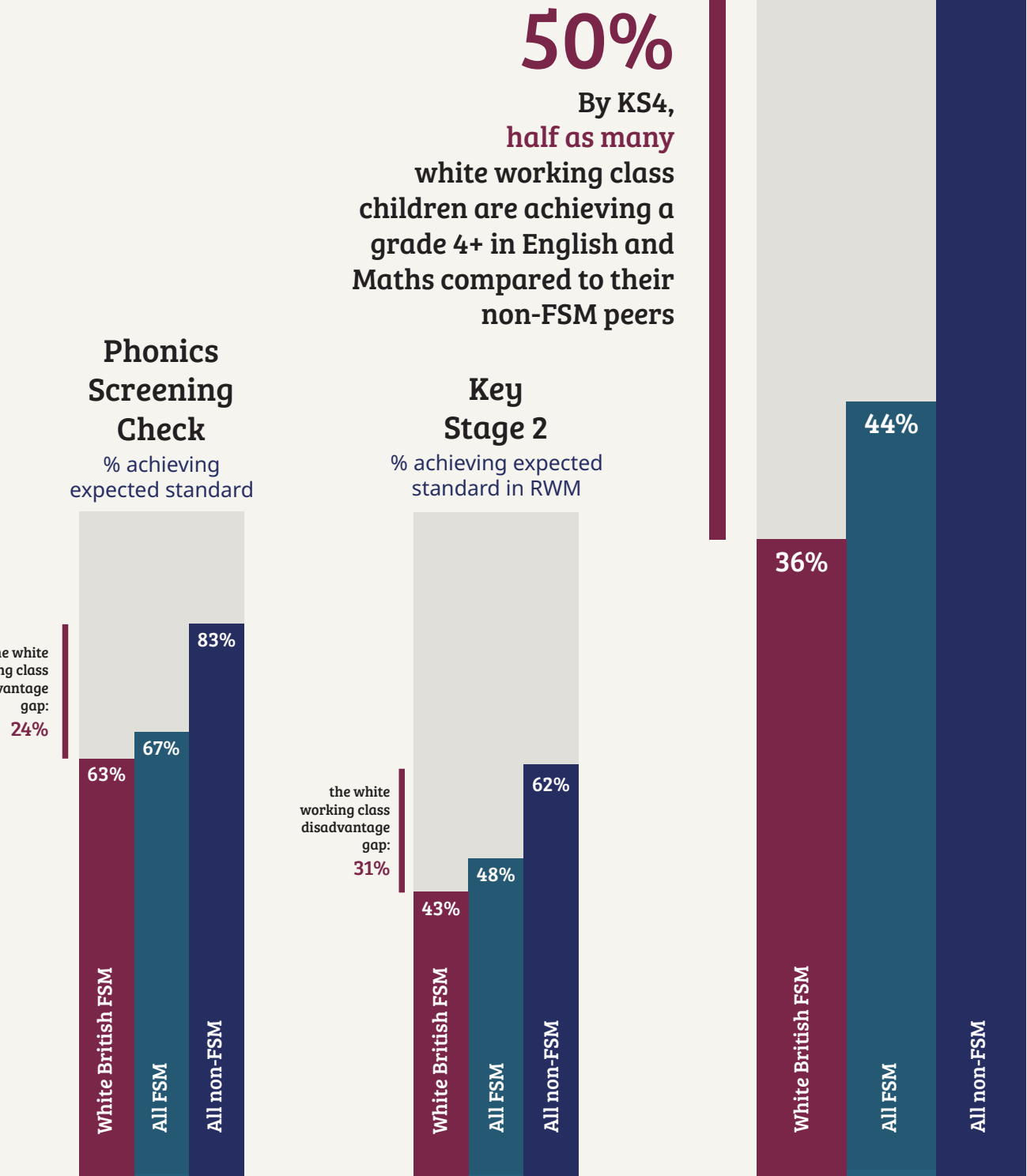
Defining ‘white working class’ within education research is challenging. For the purposes of analysing national educational outcomes data, the Inquiry primarily uses white British pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) as the best available pupil-level proxy for identifying white working class disadvantage within national datasets⁴.

The ‘White Working Class Disadvantage Gap’ increases across a school career



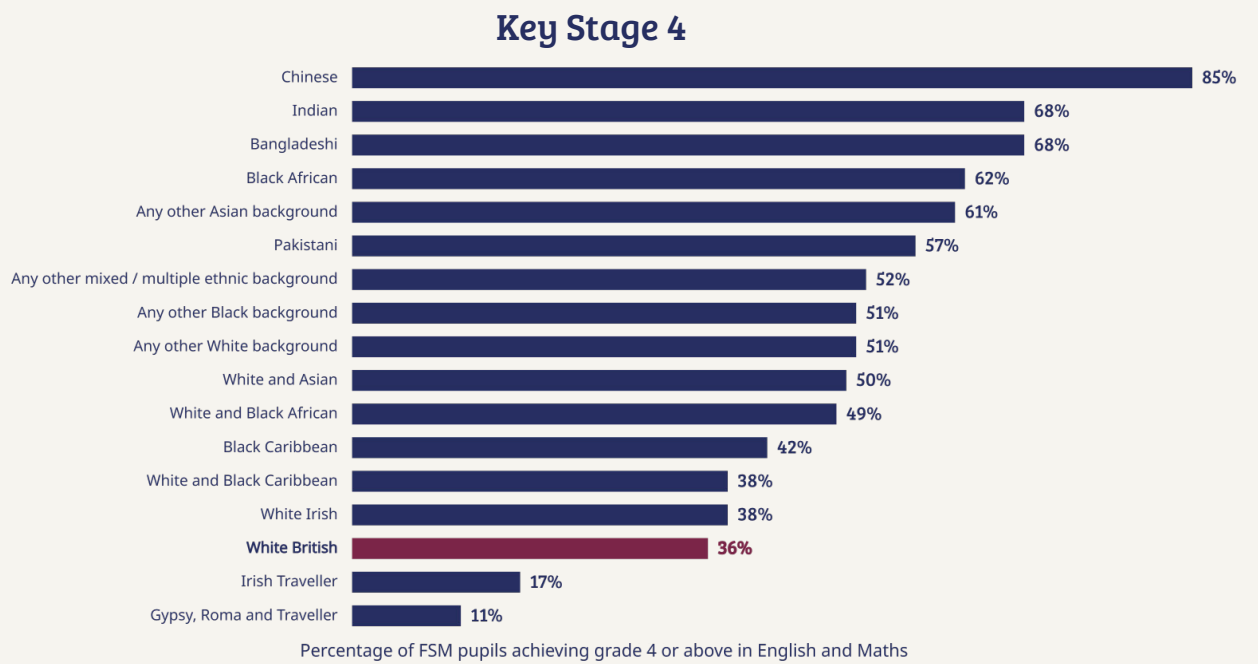
However, FSM eligibility is an imperfect measure. The earnings threshold for FSM eligibility in England is currently extremely low – net household earnings of less than £7,400 per year under Universal Credit criteria.⁵ Many families who would identify as working class, or who experience significant economic insecurity and limited access to opportunity, therefore fall outside the official FSM measure, even after the planned changes to increase eligibility to all children in households receiving Universal Credit from September.

The Inquiry therefore believes that the true scale of white working class disadvantage is likely to be substantially larger than the national pupil-level data alone currently captures. For this reason, while educational attainment analysis in this report uses white British FSM pupils, wider polling and qualitative research undertaken uses white British C2DE socio-economic classifications, allowing the Inquiry to understand a broader range of experiences, attitudes and perceptions amongst white working class children, young people and families.



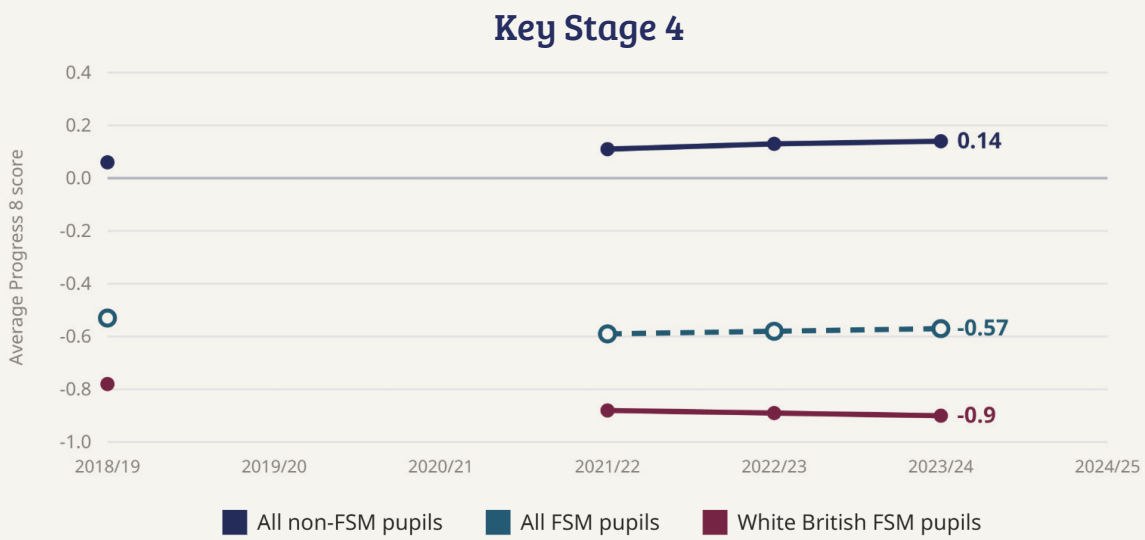
INTRODUCTION

While poverty remains the strongest predictor of educational underachievement across all ethnic groups, white British FSM pupils (who make up over half of all FSM pupils⁶) experience the weakest educational outcomes of any major ethnic group in England. This suggests that white working class underachievement cannot be understood solely as a question of poverty, but reflects a distinctive combination of socio-economic disadvantage, place, culture and educational experience.

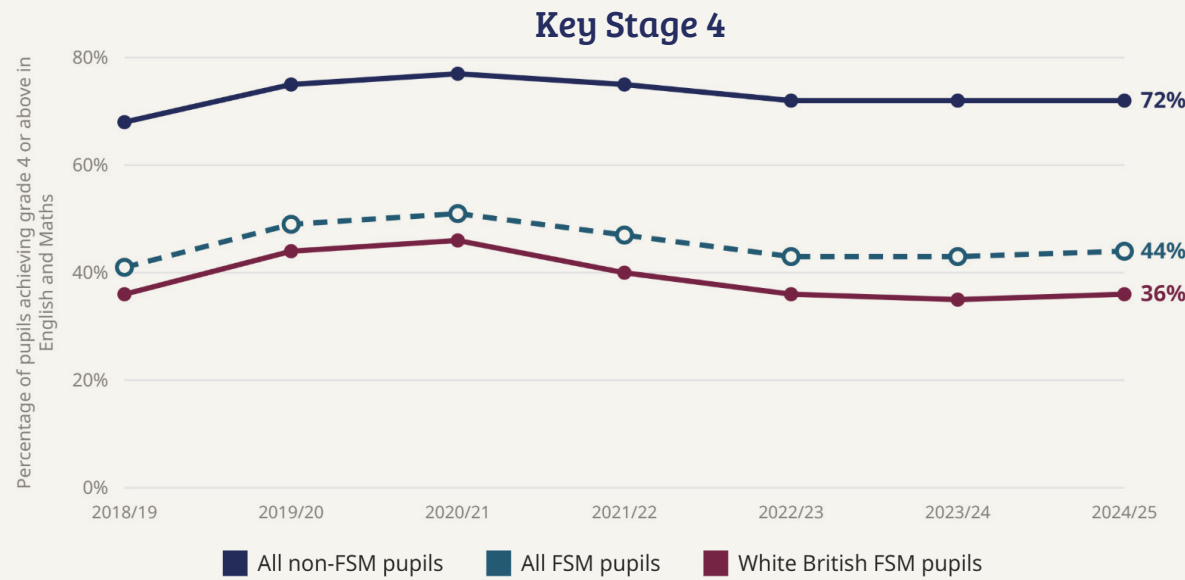
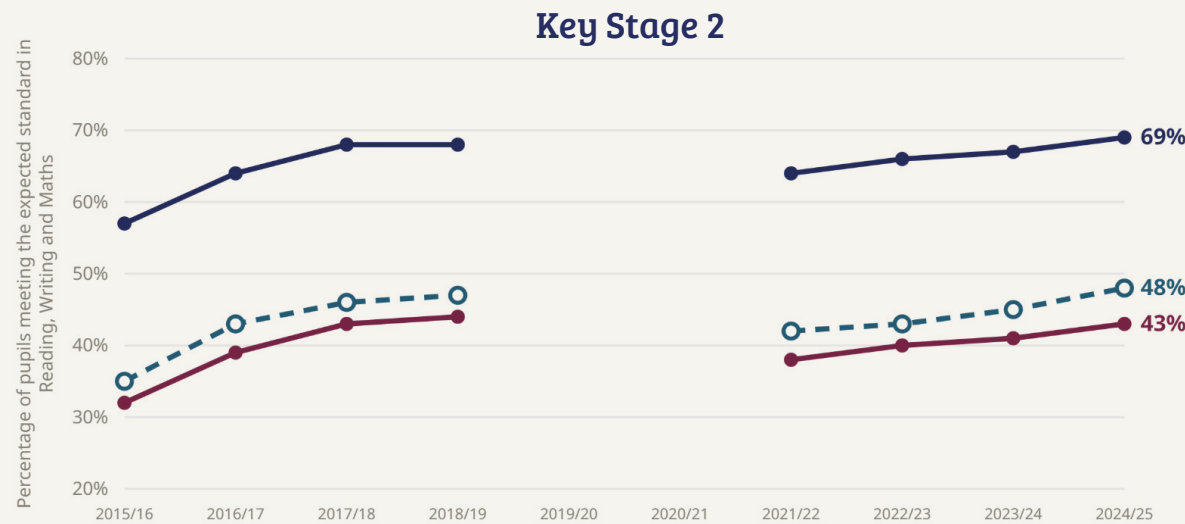


In 2024-25, only 63% of white British FSM pupils achieved the expected standard in the Phonics Screening Check, compared with 83% of non-FSM pupils⁷. By the end of primary school, only 43% achieved the expected standard in Reading, Writing and Maths at Key Stage 2, compared with 69% of non-FSM pupils⁸. By Key Stage 4, only 36% achieved a Grade 4 or above in English and Maths GCSE, compared with 72% of non-FSM pupils⁹. In other words, nearly two thirds of white British FSM pupils finish compulsory education without the minimum qualifications needed to access the vast majority of further education and employment opportunities.

This pattern is also reflected in Progress 8 scores, which measure the progress pupils make between the end of primary school and the end of secondary school, compared with pupils nationally who had similar prior attainment. White British FSM pupils consistently record some of the lowest Progress 8 scores in England. In 2024-25, white British FSM pupils had an average Progress 8 score of -0.9, which means that, on average, pupils achieved 0.9 grades lower per subject than pupils with similar prior attainment nationally¹⁰.



The Inquiry's analysis also found that these patterns have remained remarkably consistent over time. Across the last decade, white British pupils have consistently experienced some of the weakest educational outcomes in England.



The white working class disadvantage gap is therefore not a new or temporary issue, nor isolated to a single stage of education. It is a persistent structural challenge visible across multiple assessment measures and successive cohorts of children and young people across England.

About the Inquiry

The Independent Inquiry into White Working Class Educational Outcomes was established in 2025 in response to growing concern about the scale and persistence of the white working class disadvantage gap, and the limited national progress made in addressing it over time.

The Inquiry was commissioned by Star Academies, a national multi-academy trust running 36 schools across England, including in white working class communities. It is generously funded by The Christopher and Henry Oldfield Trust, a UK-registered charity that supports initiatives addressing some of society's most pressing challenges. Co-chaired by Sir Hamid Patel CBE and Baroness Estelle Morris, the Inquiry brings together a cross-sector panel of school and college leaders, academics, policymakers, charity leaders and experts from across education and wider public life.

The Inquiry's aim is to deeply understand the causes of white working class educational underachievement, learn from past successes and failures, and, most importantly, to provide clear, evidence-based, practical solutions for schools, policymakers and the wider education community. From the outset, the Inquiry was clear that this work needed to move beyond narrow discussion of attainment alone. The Panel therefore set out to understand the wider experience of growing up working class within England's education system today – including looking at issues such as belonging, engagement, attendance, mental health, parent engagement, enrichment, transitions and perceptions of future opportunity.

The Inquiry was clear that this work needed to build on the substantial body of evidence and research already available on educational disadvantage, social mobility, place and opportunity, and therefore engaged extensively with existing research through oral and written evidence submissions.

It also recognised that existing debate has often failed to hear directly from the children, parents, teachers and communities most affected by these challenges. Understanding lived experience therefore became a central part of the Inquiry's approach.

Over the course of the Inquiry, evidence was gathered through:

- Large-scale polling of white working class pupils, parents and teachers.
- Roundtables with teachers and school leaders in white working class communities.
- Focus groups with white working class pupils, parents and teachers.
- Expert oral evidence sessions.
- Immersive visits to schools and colleges achieving good outcomes for white working class pupils.
- Written evidence submissions.
- Immersive visits to white working class communities.
- New analysis of national education data.
- Roundtables with community leaders and organisations in white working class communities.

What emerged from this extensive research programme was a picture of a system in which disadvantage, disengagement and unequal access to opportunity seem to accumulate across childhood and adolescence for many white working class young people. Across the analysis, some of the weakest educational outcomes and experiences in England were found amongst white working class pupils, suggesting that the intersection of socio-economic disadvantage, working class identity, geographic inequality and white ethnicity has become one of the most significant and persistent drivers of educational underachievement within the English system today.

However, the Inquiry also found evidence that these outcomes are not inevitable or fixed. There are schools and colleges in England that do achieve outcomes for white working class pupils that are as strong or almost as strong as they achieve for other pupil groups. Teachers and leaders across the system work tirelessly to improve outcomes, but face significant challenges. With the right support, it is clear that more white working class pupils can achieve the same outcomes as their peers.

This report sets out the Inquiry's findings, recommendations and long-term vision for how England can work to close the white working class disadvantage gap, rebuild confidence in education, and ensure that all young people – regardless of background, postcode or skin colour – can see a clear and meaningful route to a happy and successful life.



Our Panel

Co-chaired by Sir Hamid Patel CBE and Baroness Estelle Morris, the Inquiry brings together a cross-sector panel of school and college leaders, academics, policymakers, charity leaders and experts from across education and wider public life.



Sir Hamid Patel CBE
Co-Chair · CEO of Star Academies



Baroness Estelle Morris
Co-Chair · Secretary of State for Education 2001-2002

PANEL MEMBERS



James Bowen
Assistant General Secretary, NAHT



Anne-Marie Canning MBE
Opportunity Mission Challenge Director, UKRI



Dame Sally Coates
Former Director of Secondary Academies, United Learning



Professor Rob Coe
Director of Research and Development, Evidence Based Education



Sir Kevan Collins
Lead Non-Executive Board Member, Department for Education



Steve Crocker OBE
Non-Executive Board Member, Department for Education



Leora Cruddas CBE
CEO, Confederation of School Trusts



Pepe Di'Iasio
General Secretary, ASCL



Lucy Heller
CEO, Ark



David Hughes CBE
CEO, Association of Colleges



Professor Lindsey Macmillan
Founding Director, UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities



Baroness Nicky Morgan
Chair, Careers and Enterprise Company, and former Secretary of State for Education



Baroness Sally Morgan
Master of Fitzwilliam College, University of Cambridge, and former Minister for Women and Equalities



Dame Lesley Powell DBE
CEO, North East Learning Trust

Our Research Programme

The Inquiry undertook the largest and most wide-ranging programme of research into white working class educational outcomes conducted in England in recent years.

Over the past year, evidence has been gathered from thousands of pupils, parents, teachers, school and college leaders, employers, academics, charities, local leaders and community organisations across England. The research combined large-scale polling, new analysis of educational outcomes data, focus groups, expert oral evidence sessions, immersive visits to white working class communities, immersive visits to schools and colleges serving those communities well, roundtables with school, college and trust leaders, and written evidence submissions from across the education sector and beyond.

The Inquiry's approach was designed to understand the lived experience of growing up white working class in England today. This included exploring issues such as belonging, attendance, mental health, enrichment, transitions, parent engagement, local opportunity and perceptions of the future, alongside attainment outcomes. The Inquiry deliberately brought together both quantitative and qualitative evidence, combining nationally representative polling and data analysis with direct engagement with the children, families and communities most affected by these challenges. The scale and breadth of the research programme allowed the Inquiry to identify consistent themes emerging across different places, phases and parts of the education system.

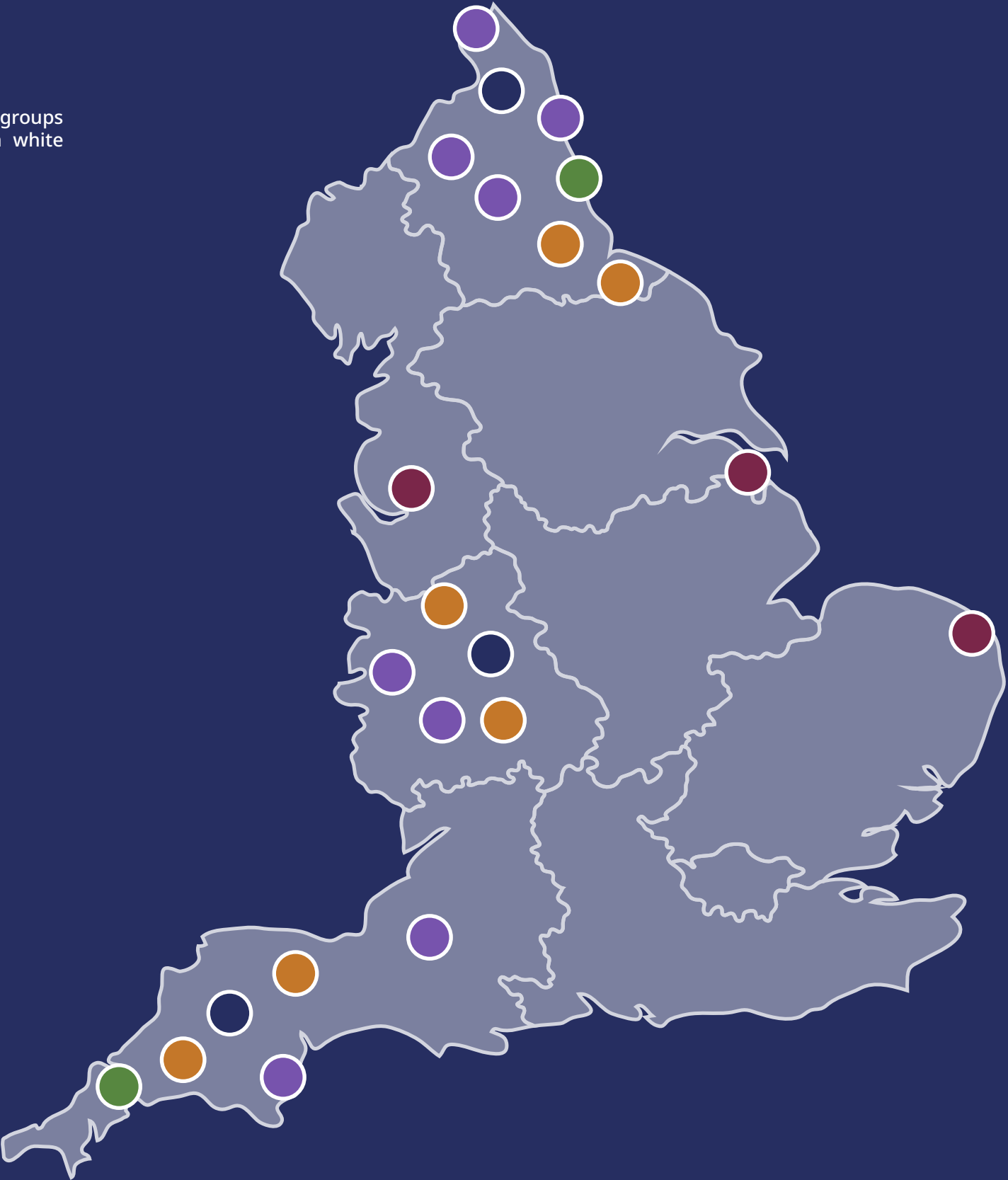
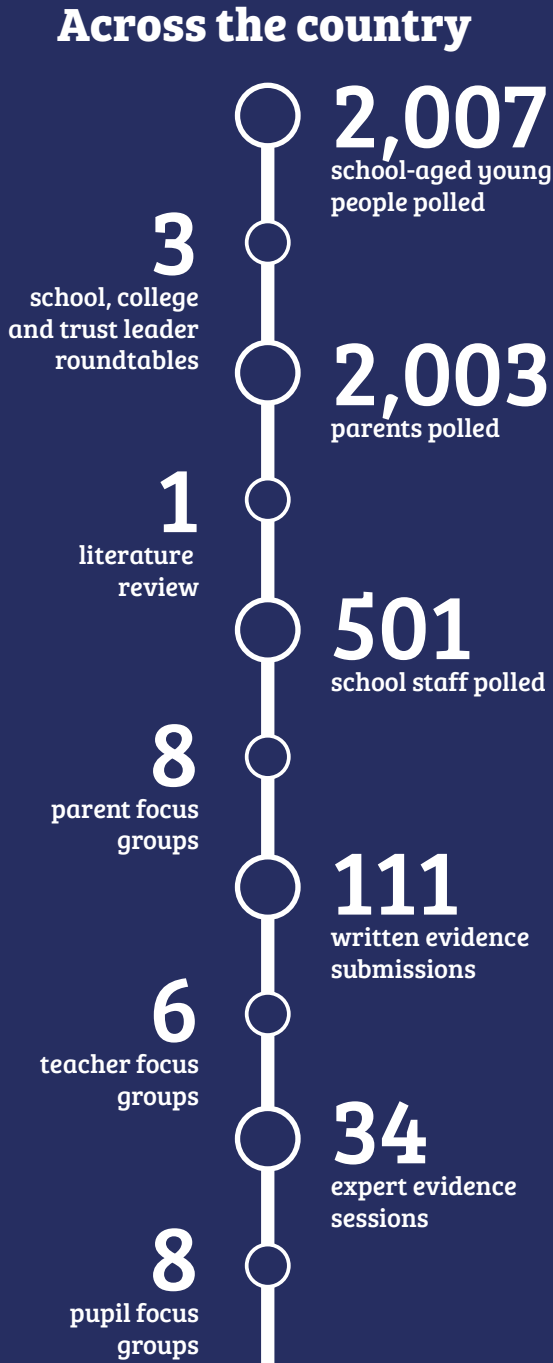
A full methodology, detailed polling tables, and supporting evidence and analysis are available on the Inquiry's website.



“The white working class disadvantage gap is not a new or temporary issue, nor isolated to a single stage of education.”

Where we went

The Inquiry ran immersives, roundtables and focus groups with pupils, parents, teachers and communities in white working class areas across England.



- Parent focus groups**
Secondary: Blyth, Ashington, Cramlington, Wallsend, Whitley Bay, North Shields, Hexham, Bishop Auckland, Walsall, Bloxwich, Meriden, and Solihull East
Primary: South Devon, Bath
- Community immersives**
Hartlepool, Redruth and Camborne
- Community roundtables**
Grimsby, Great Yarmouth, Knowsley
- Teacher focus groups**
South West, North East, West Midlands
- School and college immersives and pupil focus groups**
South West, West Midlands, North East

Our Findings

The evidence gathered through the Inquiry shows that white working class educational underachievement is not primarily the result of low aspiration or individual failure. Instead, it reflects the interaction between educational disadvantage, economic decline, weakening trust in public institutions, and declining confidence that education provides a reliable route to future opportunity.

As a result of the Inquiry's research, we present **five findings. Full detail of the data and evidence for each finding is available on our website.**



FINDING 1 OF 5

01

The education system is not set up to serve white working class children and families.

- 1.1** Across the system, there is discomfort and uncertainty about how to engage with the issue of white working class underachievement.
- 1.2** There is no shared definition of 'white working class', making coordinated action difficult.
- 1.3** A lack of data makes it difficult to identify and respond to the specific barriers affecting this group.
- 1.4** Many teachers and leaders see the issue as systemic and beyond the reach of school-level action alone.
- 1.5** However, some schools and colleges are achieving strong outcomes for white working class pupils, showing that success is possible within the current system.

02

FINDING 2 OF 5

White working class communities and the education system are misaligned in how they define success and the purpose of education.

2.1 White working class communities have different perceptions of what constitutes success.

2.2 This misalignment places strain on relationships between schools and white working class families.

2.3 For many white working class families, multigenerational experience has weakened the perceived link between education and success in later life.

2.4 The curriculum is often experienced by white working class pupils and parents as disconnected from their lived realities and future opportunities.

2.5 For many white working class families, the social experience of school and college is as important as its academic purpose.

2.6 Enrichment and extracurricular activities are highly valued by white working class families, but are not consistently accessible through schools and colleges.

03

FINDING 3 OF 5

White working class families have a poorer experience of the school system than their peers.

3.1 White working class parents are less likely than other parents to rate the quality of education at their child's school highly.

3.2 White working class pupils and parents report lower levels of belonging, voice and recognition within school.

3.3 White working class pupils are disproportionately suspended and excluded from school.

3.4 White working class pupils are less likely to attend school regularly and more likely to be severely absent.

3.5 Early literacy and language are critical to improving outcomes for white working class pupils.

3.6 Schools and colleges in white working class communities face particularly acute challenges in recruiting and retaining high quality teachers and leaders.

3.7 White working class families find the SEND system difficult to navigate and feel its shortcomings more acutely than other groups.

3.8 Many white working class parents report that school life places strain on their children's mental wellbeing.

3.9 While there are some differences in how white working class girls and boys experience education, these are smaller than the differences between white working class pupils and their peers.

04

FINDING 4 OF 5

Transitions are key pressure points where gaps widen and engagement declines for white working class young people.

- 4.1 Educational gaps for white working class children are evident before formal schooling begins.
- 4.2 The transition from primary to secondary school is a particularly vulnerable point for white working class pupils and families.
- 4.3 Further education colleges often succeed in re-engaging white working class young people who have disengaged from school.
- 4.4 Many white working class young people and parents perceive careers advice and guidance as lacking in relevance and quality.
- 4.5 Many white working class parents feel under-equipped to support their children navigating post-16 and post-18 pathways.
- 4.6 Vocational and technical routes, and particularly apprenticeships, are valued highly by white working class families, but access and availability are limited.
- 4.7 Higher education is often seen as inaccessible or irrelevant to white working class young people.

05

FINDING 5 OF 5

White working class educational outcomes are shaped by both the education system, and wider community and economic conditions.

- 5.1 Teachers, leaders and community organisations believe re-engaging white working class parents is fundamental to improving outcomes.
- 5.2 The rise of digital and screen-based activity is shaping behaviour, wellbeing and engagement among white working class pupils.
- 5.3 Educational outcomes are shaped by long-term economic change, loss of local industry, and the erosion of youth and community provision.
- 5.4 Teachers in white working class communities report that schools and colleges are increasingly absorbing the role of wider services, creating strain on capacity.
- 5.5 Despite this, white working class communities do not see schools as community hubs.
- 5.6 Strong attachment to place and poor transport limit mobility and access to opportunity for white working class young people.

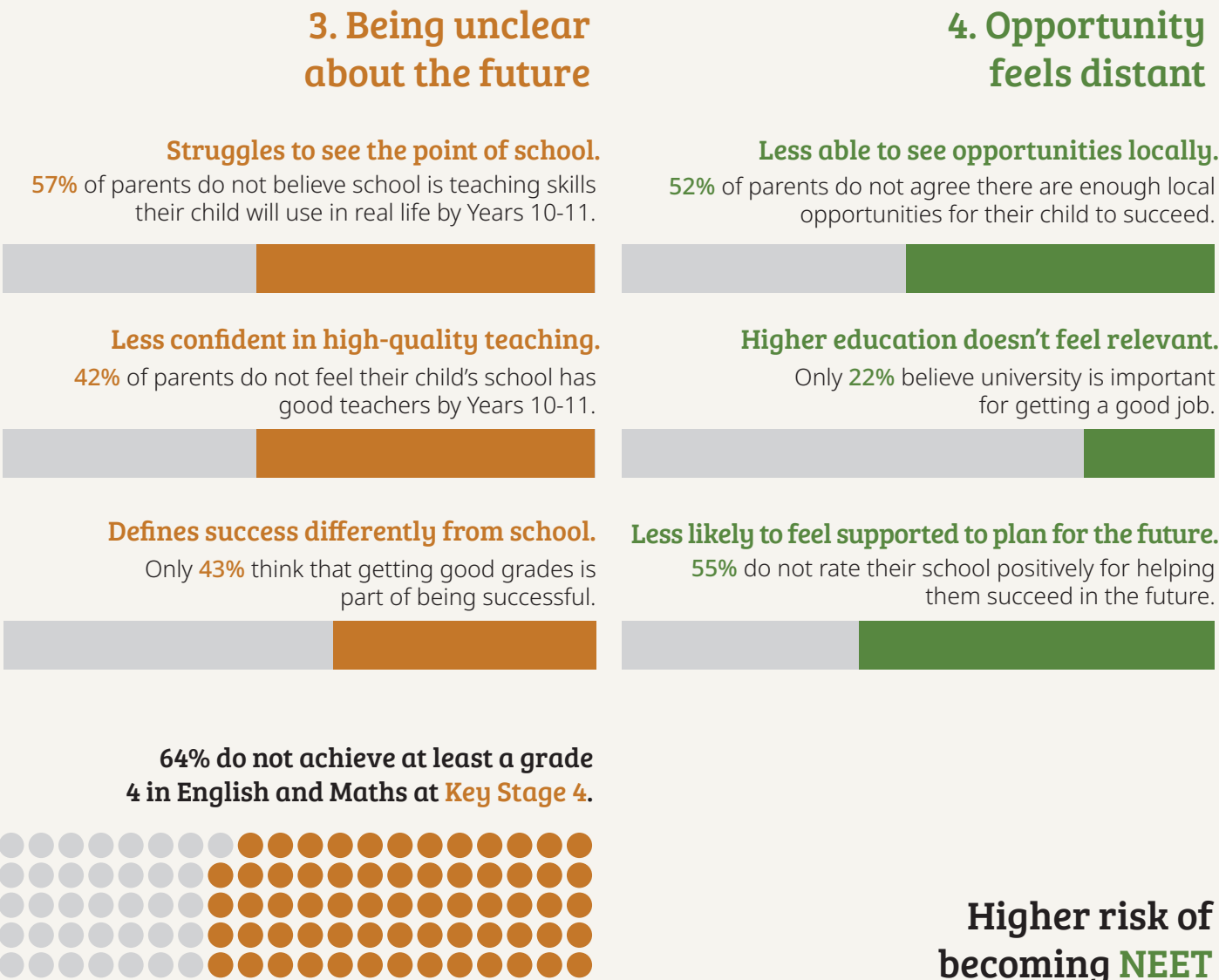
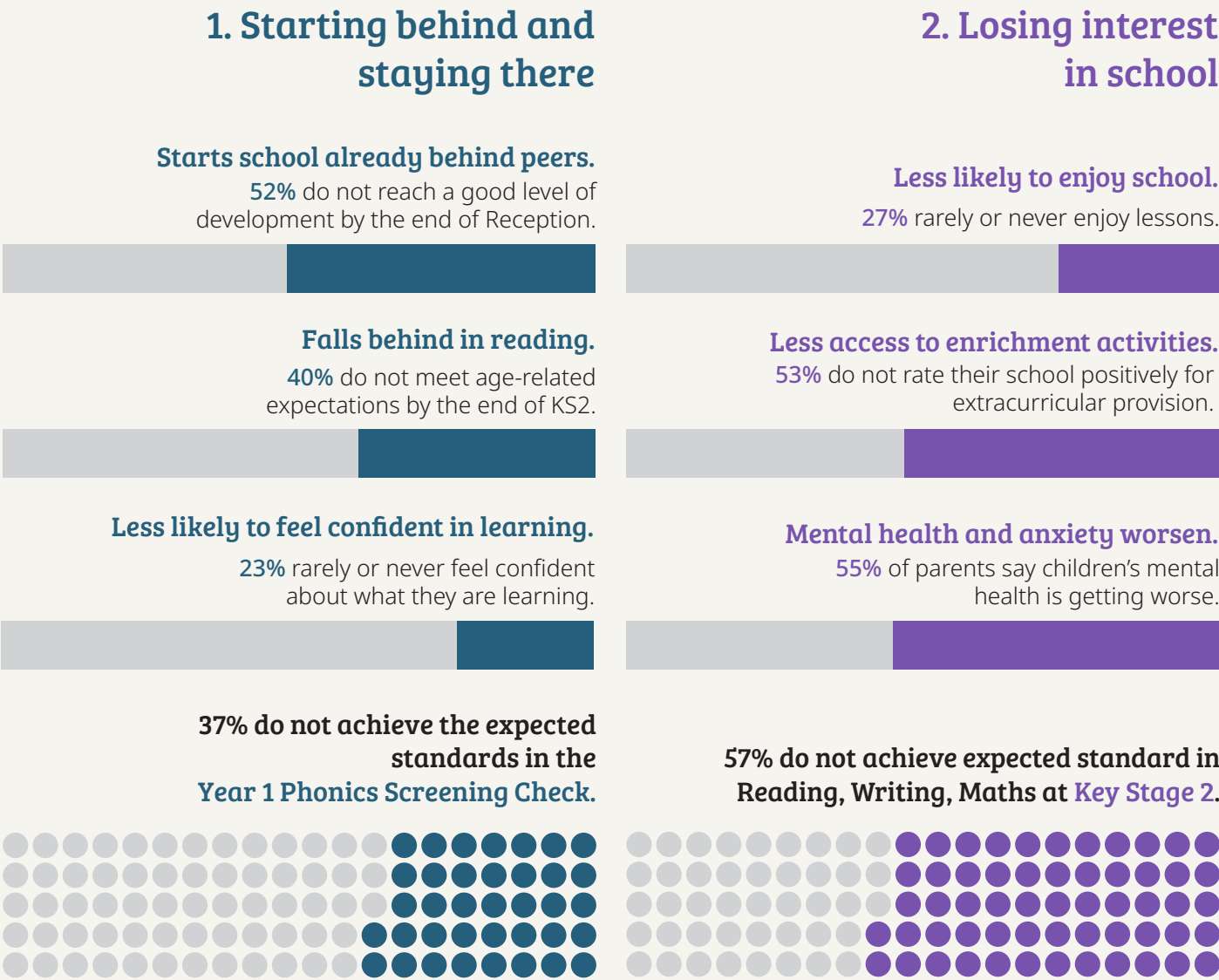
The Experience of Growing Up White Working Class in Today’s Education System

Throughout the Inquiry’s research, a picture emerged of how disadvantage, disengagement and unequal access to opportunity accumulate across childhood and adolescence for many white working class young people. Poor educational experience and weak outcomes reinforce one another over time.

This illustration draws together many of the experiences, pressures and outcomes described across the Inquiry’s research. It is not intended to represent the experience of every white working class child. Experiences vary significantly between individuals, schools and places. However, educational gaps very often emerge early, widen over time, and become reinforced across a young person’s education.

“Disadvantage, disengagement and unequal access to opportunity accumulate across childhood and adolescence.”

The experience of growing up white working class in today’s education system



Starting behind and staying there

For many white working class children, educational disadvantage begins long before formal schooling starts. Teachers, school leaders and families described children arriving at school already behind in speech, language and early development, often with less access to early support, enriching experiences and wider opportunities than their peers.

National data shows substantial early gaps in school readiness for white working class pupils. Participants linked these early gaps to wider changes in family support, local services and community infrastructure. Many described the erosion of initiatives such as Sure Start, family centres and wider early help provision as having reduced the support available to families, particularly in communities experiencing long-term economic disadvantage.

“ We’re having students come to us that aren’t ready...they haven’t had their basic needs met, and a lot of that is to do with the cost of living, not having access to Sure Start centres, and that family support.

TEACHER · WEST MIDLANDS FOCUS GROUP

These early gaps rarely stay small. As children move through primary school, difficulties with reading, confidence and communication become more pronounced over time, shaping children’s wider experience of school. Teachers and school leaders consistently described literacy as the gateway through which all later learning, confidence, belonging and engagement flow.

“ If you can’t read, you can’t do anything.
TEACHER · WEST MIDLANDS FOCUS GROUP

White working class young people were also more likely to report spending little or no time reading outside of lessons.

52%

of white FSM pupils do not reach a Good Level of Development by the end of Reception.

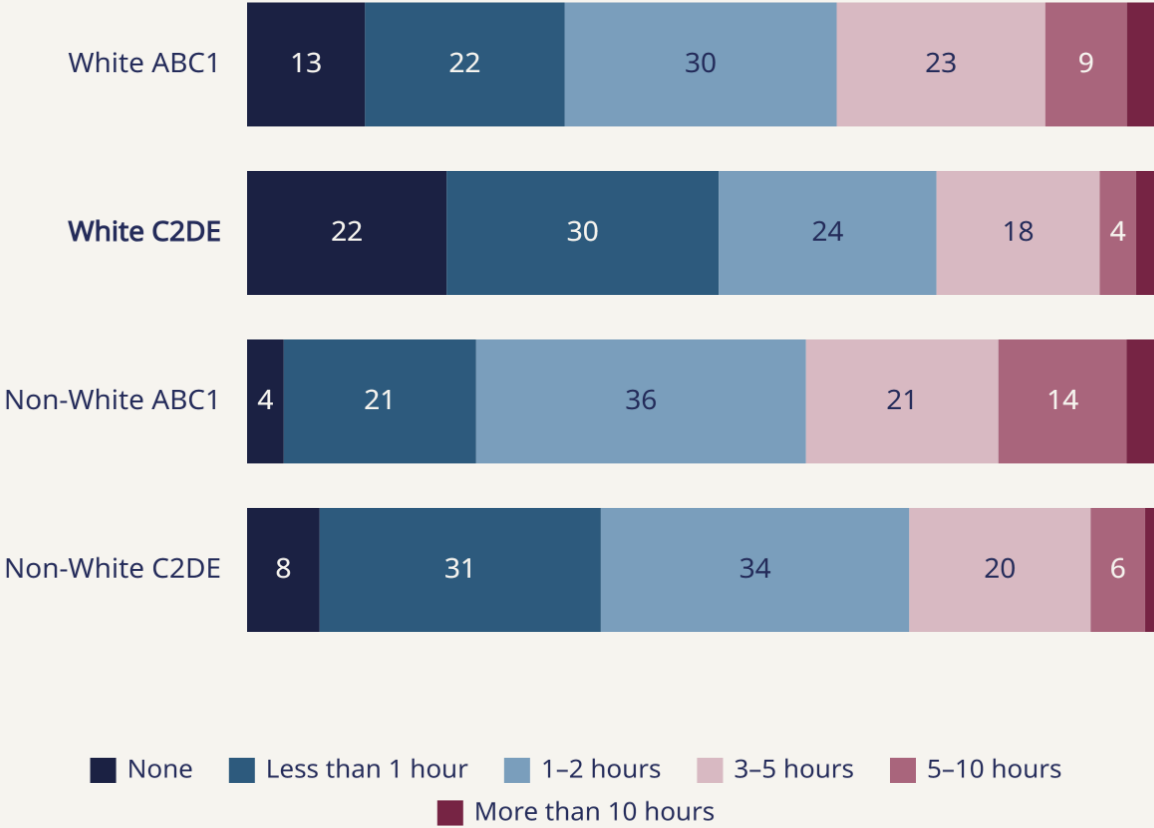
40%

of white FSM pupils do not meet the expected standard in Reading by the end of Key Stage 2.

22%

of white C2DE pupils report spending no time reading at all in an average week.

How long, if at all, do you spend doing the following in an average week?:
Reading books, comics or magazines



“ I hate reading. My mum forces me to read, like, 10 pages a day. I’m not reading 10 pages.

YEAR 5 PUPIL · PUPIL FOCUS GROUP

Teachers spoke compellingly about the cumulative effect of these literacy gaps over time. Many described pupils arriving in secondary school with reading ages several years below their chronological age, causing them to struggle to access the curriculum across every subject.

Many white working class families define success differently from the education system itself. While schools are often experienced as placing heavy emphasis on academic attainment, and particularly GCSE outcomes, many parents and young people prioritised happiness, confidence, job security and broader life readiness just as strongly as grades alone – and often saw these as being in tension with one another.

“ Schools look at pupils as a number whereas we look at our children as a person, so we’ve got completely different goals for them. The school just want academic achievement, whereas we want happiness, which is a completely different kind of success.

PARENT · SOUTH WEST FOCUS GROUP

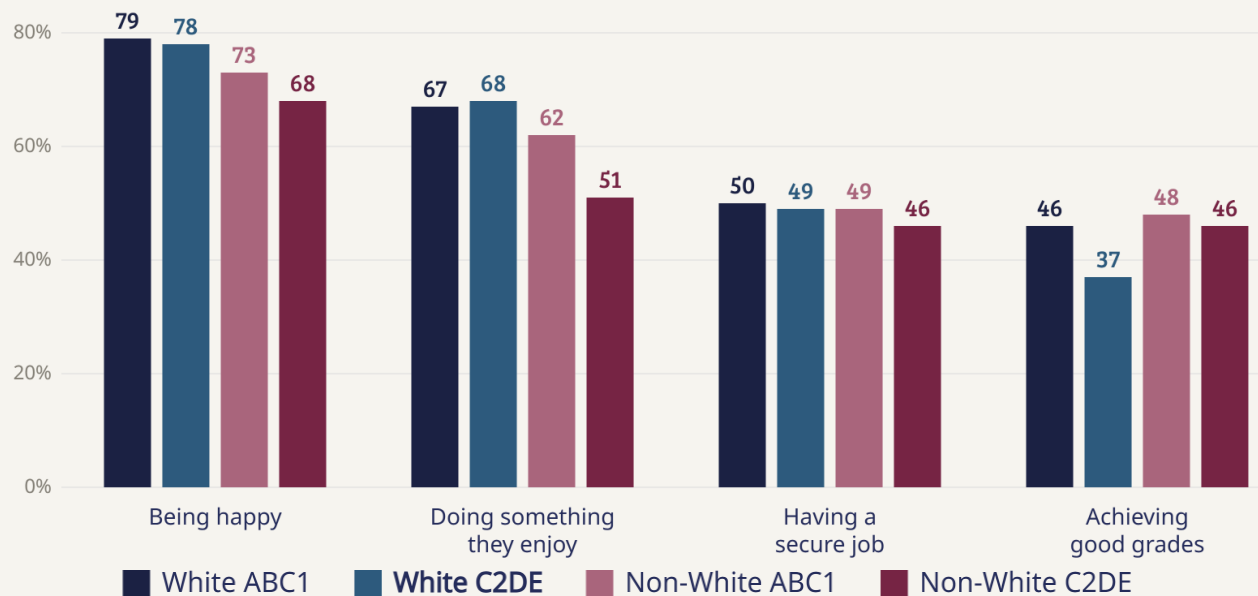
“ Success is living a happy life, having a stable job and having a roof over your head.

YEAR 7 PUPIL · PUPIL FOCUS GROUP

“ I think kids should be kids. There is more to life than doing well academically...if you work hard and you try hard, then you will be successful in one way or another.

PARENT · NORTH EAST FOCUS GROUP

What does your child “being successful” mean to you?



37%

of white C2DE parents said 'achieving good grades' was part of 'being successful'.

60%

of white C2DE parents rate their child's school as 'high quality' or 'very high quality'.

For many white working class families, the social experience of school was also seen as deeply important. Parents and pupils frequently described friendships, confidence, belonging and enjoyment as central to what they valued about education, alongside the academic learning itself.

However, white working class parents and pupils were less likely than their peers to report positive experiences of school. White working class parents were less likely to rate the quality of education at their child's school highly than their middle class peers, while white working class pupils were less likely to report confidence about what they are learning and enjoyment in their lessons.

As children grow older, many families begin to feel increasingly disconnected from the education system, particularly where school success feels less and less aligned with the lives they want their children to have.

By the end of primary school, many white working class pupils are already carrying significant gaps in literacy, confidence and engagement into adolescence, while feeling increasingly uncertain about what comes next. By the end of secondary school, white working class pupils are much more likely to be leaving school without the qualifications needed to access most post-16 opportunities.

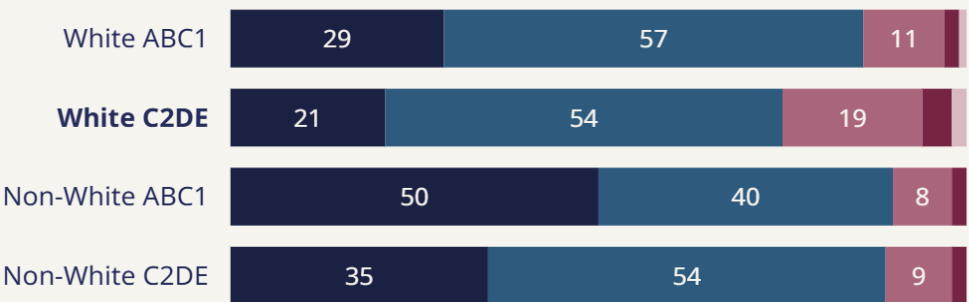
23%

of white C2DE pupils 'rarely' or 'never' feel confident about what they are learning, and 27% 'rarely' or 'never' enjoy their lessons.

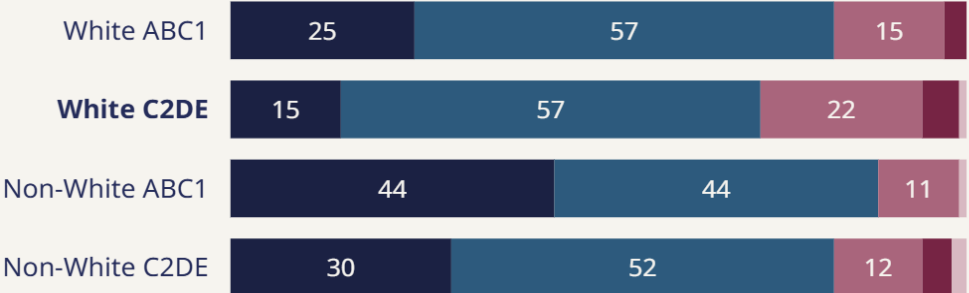
65%

of white FSM pupils leave school without a grade 4+ in English and Maths GCSEs.

I feel confident about what I'm learning



I enjoy lessons



Always Often but not always Rarely Never Don't know

Losing interest in school

For many white working class pupils and their families, the transition from primary to secondary school represents a major turning point in their relationship with education. Across the Inquiry's research, adolescence – and particularly the early secondary years – emerged as the point at which belonging, confidence and engagement decline more sharply.

While many white working class pupils described primary school as familiar, centred around relationships and community, secondary school was often experienced as larger, more impersonal and more rules-driven. Parents frequently spoke about losing visibility of their child's daily experience of school as their interactions with teachers and school staff decreased, while pupils described feeling anxious about friendships and belonging, as well as navigating a much less personal environment.

The experience of moving from primary to secondary school was something that both white working class pupils and their parents found difficult and unsettling. Key Stage 3 repeatedly emerged as the point at which many pupils disengage from education more fundamentally. Teachers and school leaders spoke about declining attendance, rising behaviour challenges and growing emotional disengagement during Years 7 to 9.

I'm so nervous my friends and I won't be in the same lessons as each other.

YEAR 6 PUPIL · PUPIL FOCUS GROUP

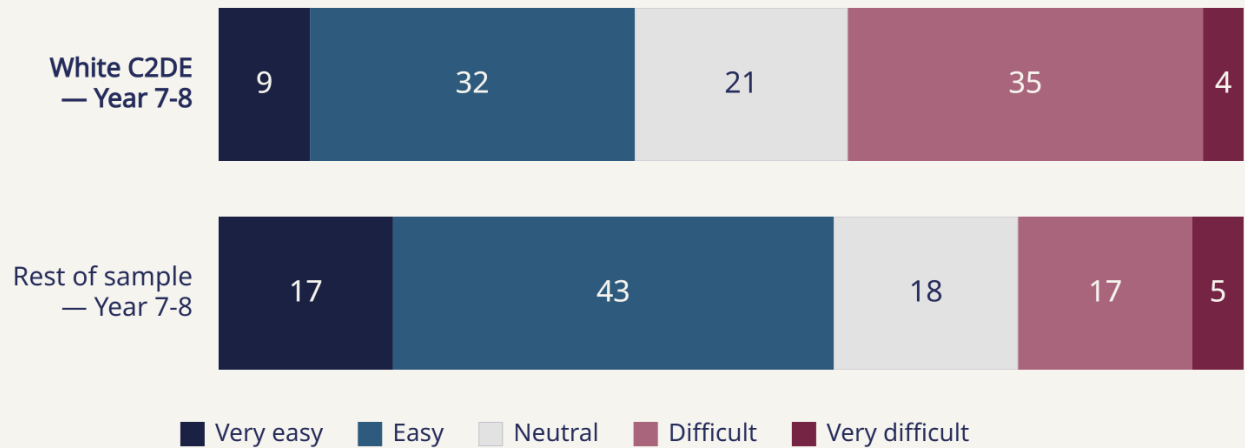
38%

of white C2DE pupils described their experience of moving to secondary school as 'difficult' or 'very difficult'.

36%

of white C2DE primary parents said they felt 'not very' or 'not at all' prepared for transition to secondary.

How would you describe your experience of moving school? (Pupils)



As soon as they went to secondary, they instantly didn't want to go to school anymore.

PARENT · CAMBORNE COMMUNITY IMMERSIVE

At primary school you're in the playground every day and you know everybody. Then suddenly it goes from that to nothing.

PARENT · WEST MIDLANDS FOCUS GROUP

Many contributors also argued that Key Stage 3 is too often deprioritised within school improvement and accountability systems, despite its importance in shaping later outcomes.

Something happens at Key Stage 3 that absolutely turns young people off.

COLLEGE LEADER · COLLEGE LEADER ROUNDTABLE

The Inquiry heard repeatedly that many white working class pupils struggle to see the relevance of what they are learning to their future lives, local opportunities and aspirations. This was particularly pronounced during the secondary years, where pupils, parents and teachers often described the curriculum as increasingly disconnected from the realities of the communities young people live in and the futures they imagine for themselves.

“ They struggle to connect the dots between the relevance of Year 8 History and the ambition they’ve got.

COLLEGE LEADER · COLLEGE LEADER ROUNDTABLE

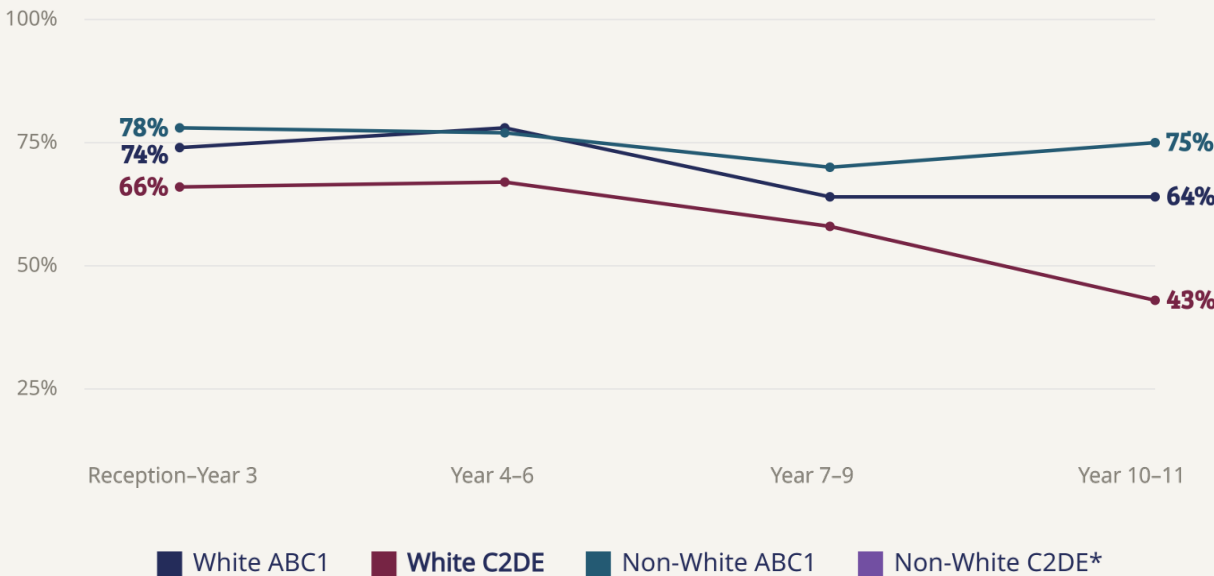
“ I know the school is busy because they want you to do well in your GCSEs, but I feel like we should learn about the wider world more.

YEAR 10 PUPIL · PUPIL FOCUS GROUP

For some pupils, this disconnect contributes to a growing sense that school success was designed for “other people”, rather than for people like them.

Where schools were achieving stronger outcomes, pupils and parents described teachers and leaders who were able to make learning feel relevant, credible and connected to young people’s futures. In these schools, teachers were often very visible, worked hard on building relationships with pupils and parents and really understood the communities they served, and placed much greater emphasis on helping pupils understand why what they were learning mattered.

Percentage of parents who agree their child’s school is good at teaching skills their child will use in real life



43%

of white C2DE parents of pupils in Years 10-11 say school is good at teaching skills their child will use in real life. This marks a sharp decline from 58% of parents of pupils in Years 7-9 and 67% of parents of pupils in Years 4-6.

58%

of white C2DE parents of pupils in Years 10-11 rated the quality of teaching highly at their child's school. This marks a sharp decline from 75% of white C2DE parents of pupils in Years 4-6.

“ In English, they’ll say ‘you could be a playwright’ because we’re doing Shakespeare, and all the subjects will have a different job, but related to the subject.

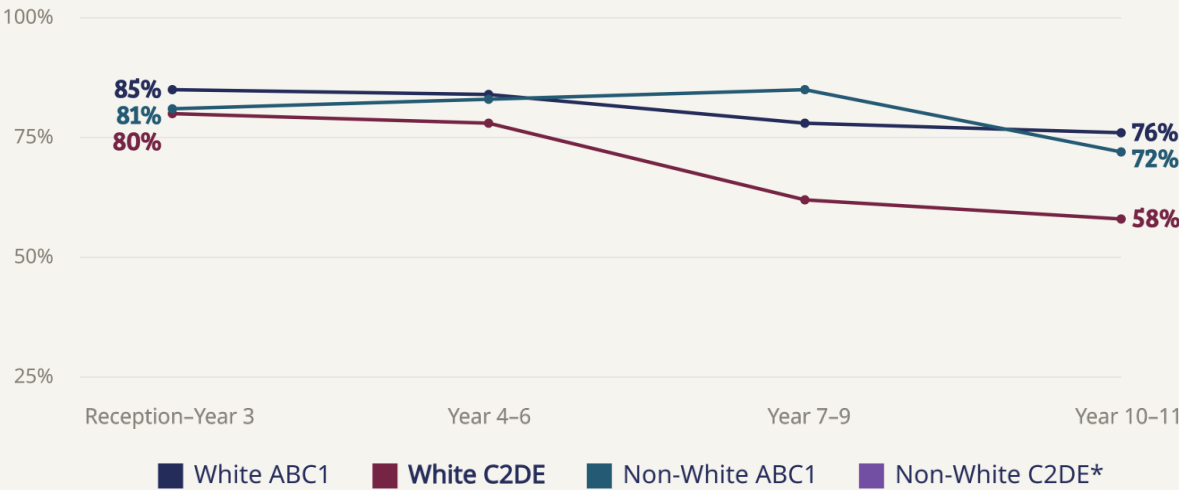
YEAR 11 PUPIL · PUPIL FOCUS GROUP

“ I’ve really enjoyed my art lessons now, but I think that’s because I’ve got a bond now with my teacher... you’re just more engaged in what you’re doing.

YEAR 10 PUPIL · PUPIL FOCUS GROUP

However, white working class parents were generally less confident in the quality of their child’s teachers through education, with a particularly sharp decline in confidence during Years 7-9.

Percentage of parents who agree their child’s school has good teachers



Attendance and exclusion patterns suggest that disengagement is physical as well as emotional. Around two in five white working class pupils are persistently absent from school, while rates of suspension and exclusion are significantly higher than for other groups. White working class boys are the single group most likely to be suspended or permanently excluded from school.

Teachers and leaders did not describe attendance and exclusion as isolated behavioural problems, but as symptoms of wider disengagement, unmet need and weakening relationships between families and schools.

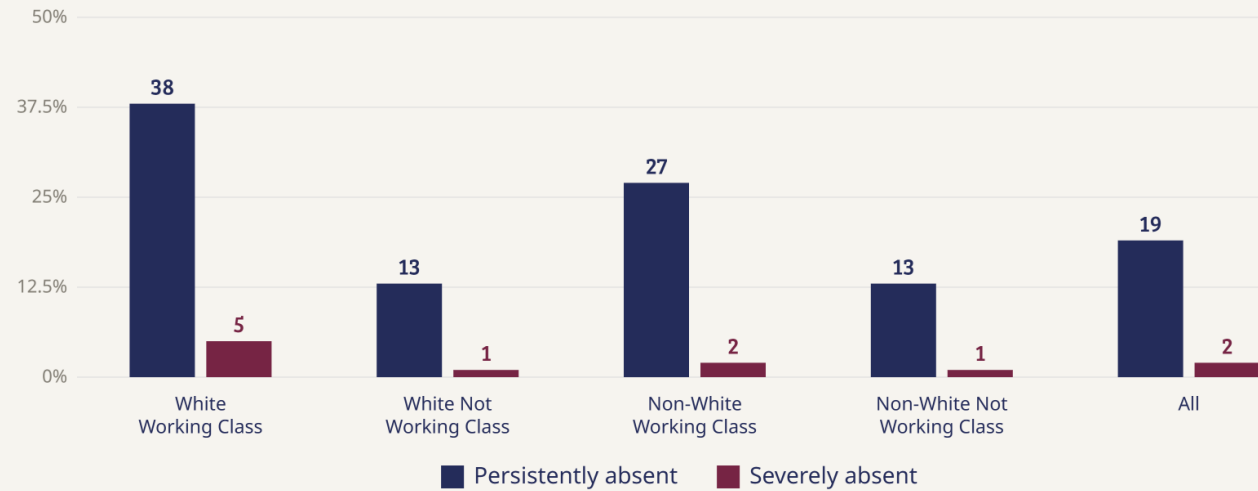
“ **It’s not one child not attending. It’s become normalised across whole friendship groups and communities.**

HEADTEACHER VIA TEACH FIRST WRITTEN EVIDENCE SUBMISSION

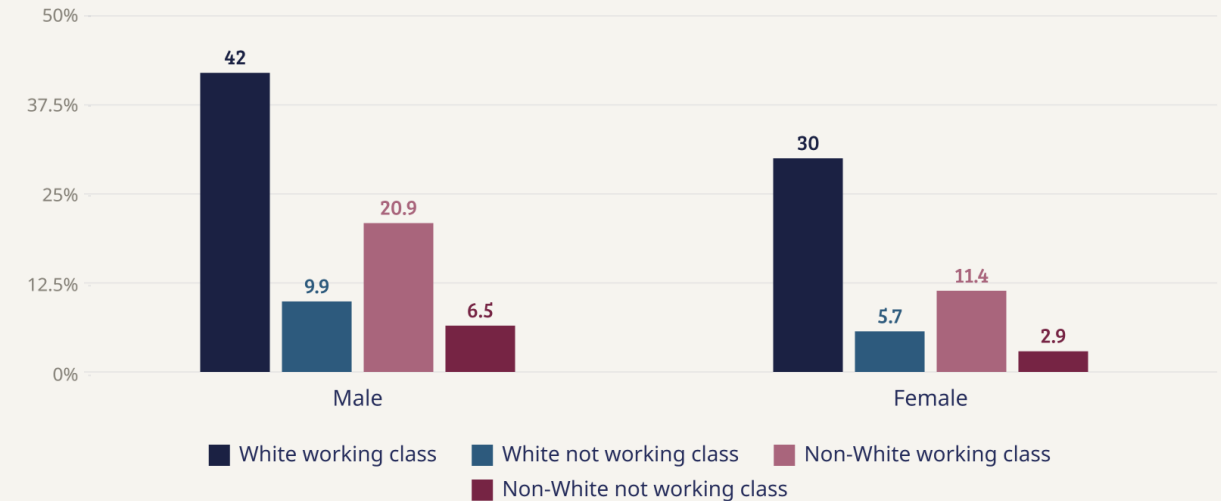
38%

of white FSM pupils are persistently absent; 5% are severely absent.

Absence rate by pupil group (2023/24)



Suspension rate by pupil group and sex (2023/24)



Mental health concerns also emerged repeatedly throughout the Inquiry. White working class parents were more likely than other groups to report increasing concerns about their children’s wellbeing, and less likely to rate the quality of mental health support available at their child’s school. They were also most likely to say that their child ‘feeling anxious about going to school’ was an acceptable reason not to attend.

“ **Pressure to get good grades makes your mental health worse.**

YEAR 7 PUPIL · PUPIL FOCUS GROUP

“ **I am a ‘mental health over grades’ kind of mum. I also do want my kids to get good grades because I know their future will depend on it. But I feel that the school does shove it down their throats so much about their grades and their results that they just ignore their mental health and their happiness.**

PARENT · SOUTH WEST FOCUS GROUP

3x

White FSM pupils are almost three times as likely to be suspended (36% of all white working class pupils) and four times more likely to be excluded (0.4% of all white working class pupils) than the next most affected group.

55%

of white C2DE parents said children’s mental health is getting worse over time, and only 48% rated the mental health support at their child’s school positively.

57%

of white C2DE parents said anxiety was an acceptable reason not to attend school for a day.

Participants linked these mental health concerns to the increasing role of smartphones, social media and screen-based activity in young people's lives. Parents, pupils and teachers all described social media as affecting sleep, concentration, wellbeing and friendships, while also displacing activities such as reading, homework, enrichment and in-person socialising.

“ I go on my phone as soon as I get home and stay on it until I go to bed.

YEAR 6 PUPIL · PUPIL FOCUS GROUP

“ You can't go home and switch off anymore. Everything follows you back on your phone.

PARENT · NORTH EAST FOCUS GROUP

Many white working class pupils experience significantly less access to enrichment and extracurricular activities through school than their peers, despite pupils, parents and teachers consistently describing these experiences as fundamental to building and maintaining confidence, belonging and engagement with school. Enrichment was repeatedly described not as an optional extra or as a nice-to-have, but as one of the best ways schools can sustain attendance, build relationships, and help young people feel successful and interested in education.

“ I love homework club because I get to sit with my friends and just catch up on everything.

YEAR 10 PUPIL · PUPIL FOCUS GROUP

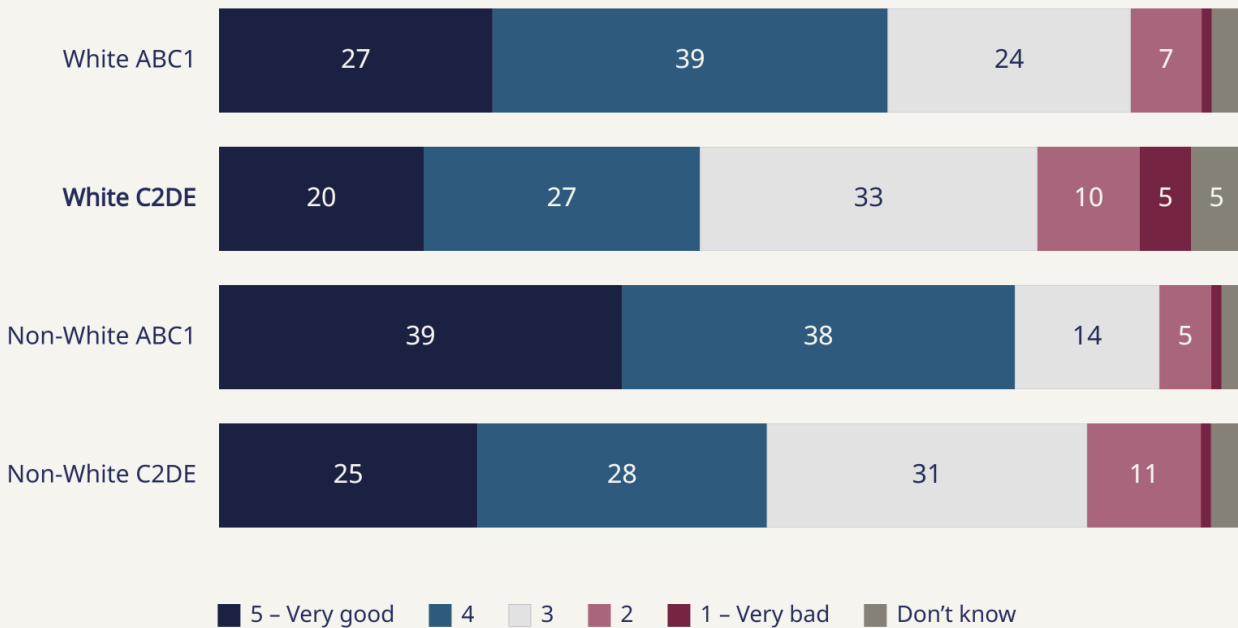
“ The younger ones do school clubs, but the clubs almost stop, I think, when they get to secondary level.

PARENT · NORTH EAST FOCUS GROUP

53%

of white C2DE pupils did not rate their school positively on providing enrichment activities outside of lesson time.

For each of the following, how would you rate your school or college on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is very bad and 5 is very good?: Activities outside of lesson time like sport, drama and music



Where schools were achieving stronger outcomes for white working class pupils, participants consistently described highly relational cultures built around belonging, high expectations, lots of enrichment and trusted adult relationships. These schools placed significant emphasis on attendance, enrichment, transition and pastoral care alongside academic standards.

“ It's about support rather than punishment. From the moment they walk in, children should feel welcomed and that they belong here.

HEADTEACHER VIA THE TEACH FIRST WRITTEN EVIDENCE SUBMISSION

Across the research strands, adolescence emerged as the point at which many white working class pupils lose confidence that education is for people like them. For many, secondary school becomes less a place of support, belonging and opportunity, and more a system they gradually disengage from over time.

Being unclear about the future

As white working class young people move through the secondary education system, many describe facing an increasingly fragmented and unclear set of pathways into further study, employment and long-term opportunity.

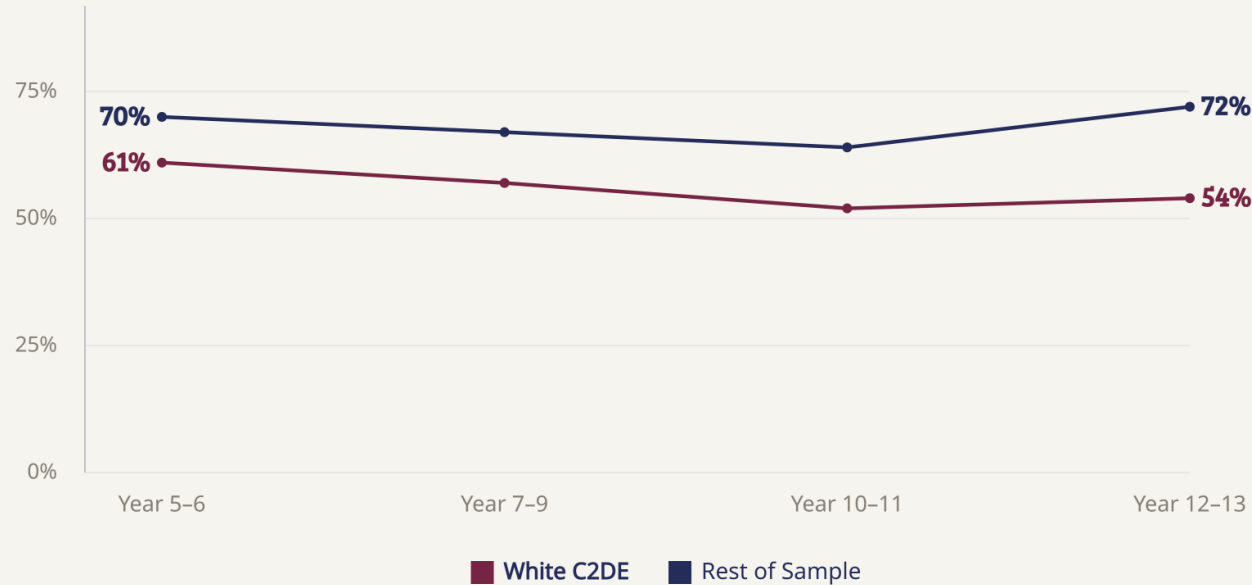
Navigating these pathways is often particularly challenging for white working class pupils, many of whom do not feel school is helping them understand or access a credible route into further study or employment.

Practical, vocational and employment-linked routes, and particularly apprenticeships, are highly valued within many white working class communities. Polling conducted for the Inquiry found that staff in schools or colleges serving predominantly white working class communities are more likely to say that their pupils are interested in doing an apprenticeship than those in other schools.

55%

of white C2DE pupils in Years 10-11 do not rate their school positively with 'helping students succeed in the future'.

% of pupils rating their school as 4-5 out of 5 for "helping students succeed in the future"



At the same time, white working class young people are significantly less likely to expect to go to university and less likely to see university as important for getting a good job. Crucially, while interest in university increases steadily with age for other pupil groups, this does not happen for white working class pupils, many of whom described becoming increasingly uncertain about whether higher education felt relevant, accessible or worthwhile for them.

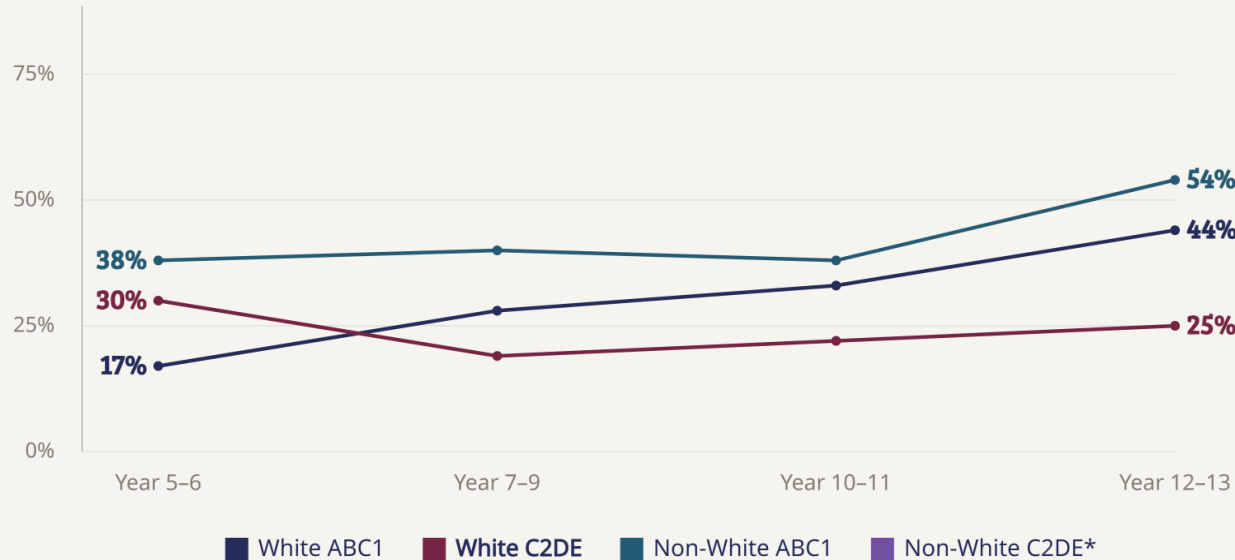
77%

of staff in schools serving predominantly white working class communities said their pupils want to do an apprenticeship.

22%

of white C2DE pupils say university is important for getting a good job.

% of pupils saying "going to university" is part of being successful



White working class pupils are less likely to feel confident about navigating post-16 and post-18 options. They are less likely to report receiving key elements of careers support, including one-to-one guidance, work experience, careers events and support understanding post-16 pathways, and staff at majority white working class schools rate the careers advice for their young people on FSM less positively.

Careers guidance was often experienced as generic, too heavily focused on university pathways, and insufficiently connected to local labour markets and employment opportunities.

“ I don’t really know what to advise them.

PARENT · NORTH EAST FOCUS GROUP

“ They don’t really explain all the options properly. Everyone just gets told university.

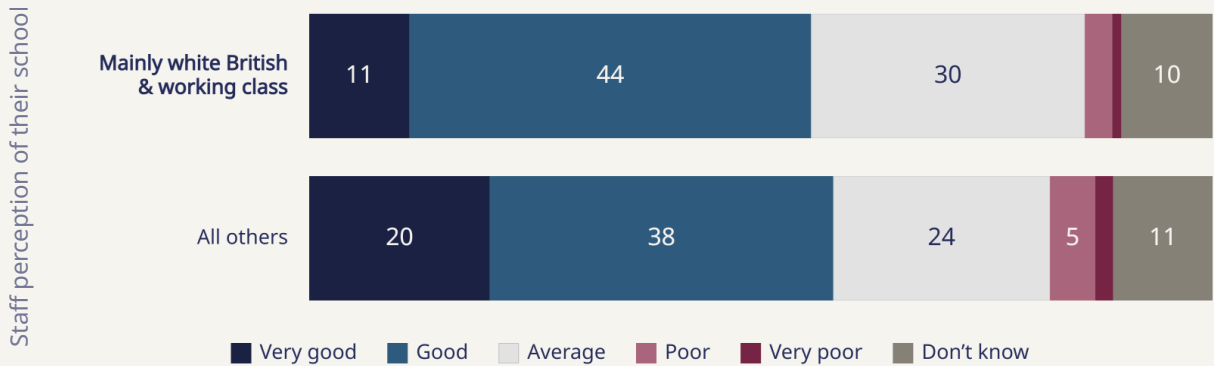
YEAR 10 PUPIL · PUPIL FOCUS GROUP

60%

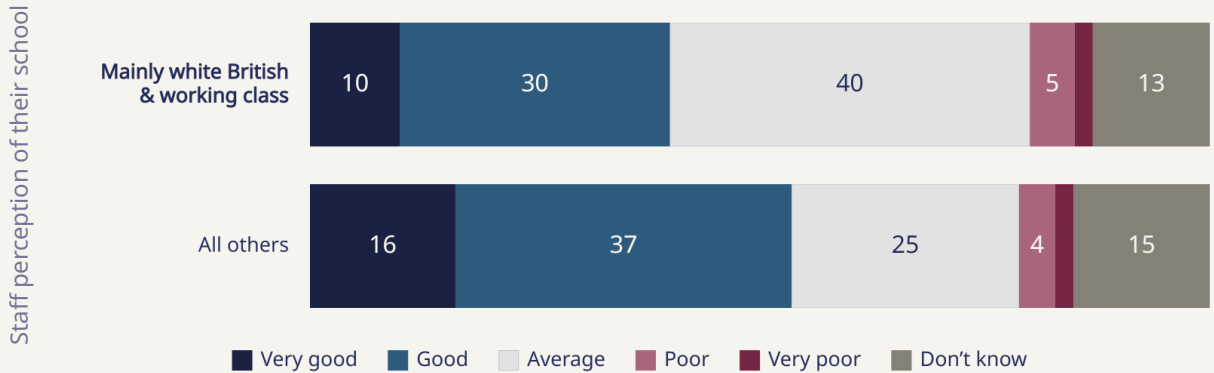
of staff in majority white working class schools and colleges do not rate the careers advice provided for young people on free school meals positively.

How would you rate the careers advice provided at your school or college for the following groups?

For children and young people overall



For children and young people on FSM



This uncertainty was often compounded by wider concerns about risk, debt and future security. Many parents and young people questioned whether higher education offered a reliable route into stable employment, particularly in places where professional and graduate opportunities appeared limited.

“ Uni would be my first choice, but I’m quite scared of student loans.

STUDENT · COLLEGE IMMERSIVE

“ Even young people leaving university are often now working on minimum wage in Aldi.

PARENT · NORTH EAST FOCUS GROUP

For many families, these perceptions are shaped by multigenerational experiences of education and work. Parents frequently described their own lives as evidence that success is possible without strong academic qualifications, while others reflected on generations of insecure employment, limited local opportunity and poor educational experiences. Participants repeatedly described communities where belief in education as a reliable route to success had weakened over a very long period of time.

“ It’s almost a generational cycle...because you didn’t aspire to much, then your kids won’t aspire to much.

PARENT · NORTH EAST FOCUS GROUP

“ The whole grades situation doesn’t make any difference to getting a job or anything. We spend all them years saying do school, college, university...to get nothing.

PARTICIPANT · HARTLEPOOL COMMUNITY IMMERSIVE

“ I didn’t come out with a great education, but I haven’t not been successful.

PARENT · SOUTH WEST FOCUS GROUP

BEING UNCLEAR ABOUT THE FUTURE - CONTINUED

In contrast, apprenticeships and technical routes were frequently described as more tangible, practical and connected to the realities of working life. Apprenticeships were often viewed positively because they combined earning, learning and progression without requiring young people to leave home or take on significant financial risk.

However, despite strong demand and significant Government emphasis on apprenticeships, access was widely described as limited, highly competitive and unevenly distributed.

“ **Everybody talks about apprenticeships, but there just aren’t enough of them.** ”

COMMUNITY ROUNDTABLE · GRIMSBY

Research participants argued that apprenticeship opportunities are particularly constrained in many white working class communities because of the structure of local labour markets. In areas dominated by smaller employers, there are often fewer apprenticeship opportunities available, while the apprenticeship levy system was repeatedly described as favouring larger organisations and urban economies.

Further education colleges emerged as a notable exception within this picture. Across immersive visits and evidence sessions, colleges were consistently described as environments where many white working class young people successfully re-engage with education after difficult experiences in school. Students and staff described colleges as more adult, more respectful, and more clearly connected to future employment and real life.

“ **They treat you better. You don’t have to ask to go to the toilet or to say something.** ”

STUDENT · COLLEGE IMMERSIVE

“ **And the college does welcome all sorts of different people and you can kind of express yourself. So I think allowing the individuality also just makes it a more welcoming place.** ”

STUDENT · COLLEGE IMMERSIVE

Many research participants argued that colleges are often more successful because they provide clearer links between learning, work and progression, while also creating environments where young people feel more trusted, respected and listened to. However, contributors also stressed that colleges are frequently working with young people who arrive already carrying years of disengagement, weaker attainment and lower confidence.

Across the research, the post-16 system was repeatedly described as unclear and difficult to navigate, and too dependent on family knowledge and local opportunity. Too many white working class young people reach the end of compulsory education without a clear and supported route into skilled work, further education, or long-term progression.

“College treated you like a person rather than a child.”

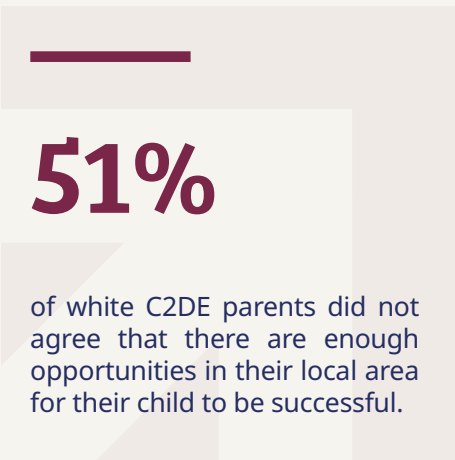
PARENT · COLLEGE IMMERSIVE



Growing up where opportunity feels distant

Participants in this Inquiry argued that white working class educational outcomes cannot be understood in isolation from the wider social, economic and community conditions surrounding schools and families. Educational disengagement was repeatedly described as a school-level issue, yes, but also as the product of long-term economic change, weakened local infrastructure, declining trust in institutions in general, and unequal access to opportunity between places.

Many research participants linked current educational outcomes to the long-term impact of deindustrialisation and economic decline in post-industrial, coastal and rural communities in particular. Teachers, parents and local leaders described how the erosion of stable local industries had weakened the perceived connection between education, work and future security across generations.



“ The dignity of work has been eroded. And if that end point isn’t there, what is the point?

COMMUNITY ROUNDTABLE · KNOWSLEY

“ Especially a lot of my friends who were at the top of the class, they’ve gone away and they’ve got these big jobs or done really well and then gone travelling. But [there’s] not many of my friends down here still.

COMMUNITY IMMERSIVE · CAMBORNE

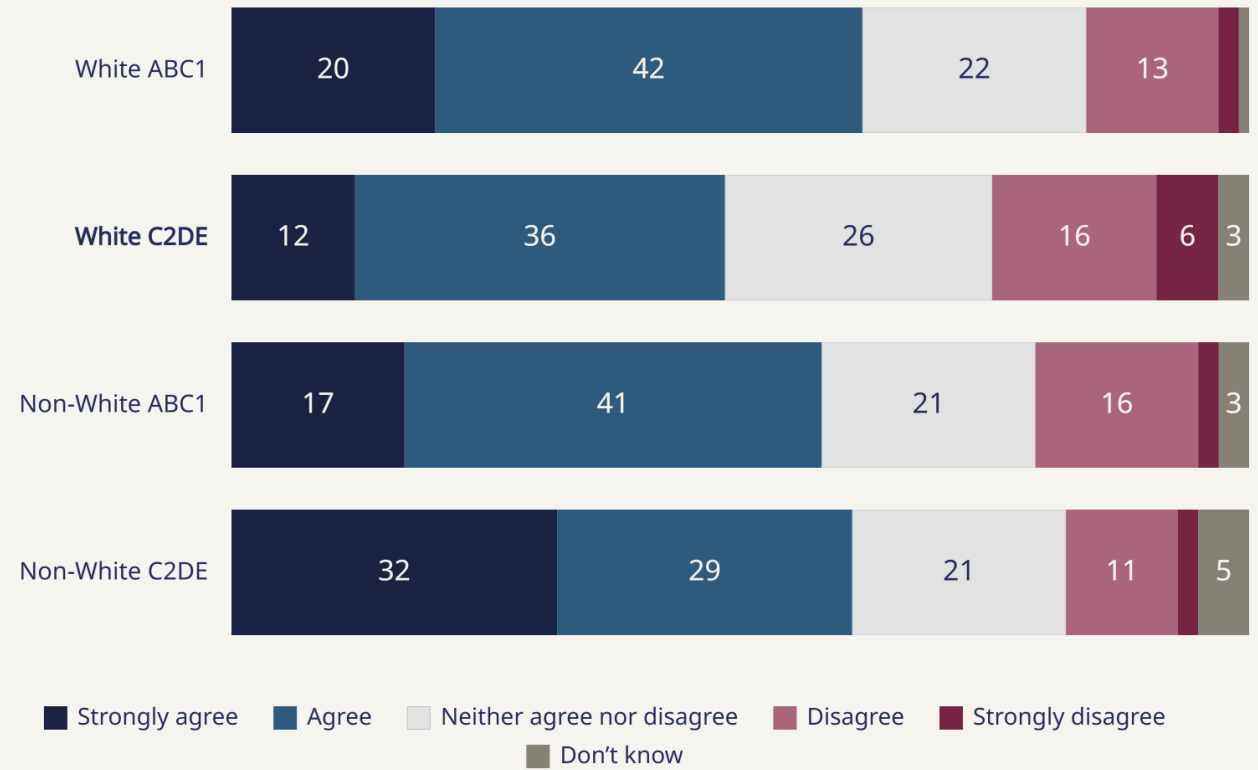
In many of the communities in which the Inquiry conducted research, this had contributed to a broader sense that education no longer provides a reliable route to success or stability. Participants frequently described this not as a lack of aspiration per se, but as a weakening of faith that the system will ultimately deliver meaningful opportunity for them.

“ They’ve found it difficult to find work, but they want to stay here because it’s their home, but there isn’t a job. So, they’ll get odd jobs... but that doesn’t inspire them at all to be positive about their education.

COMMUNITY IMMERSIVE · CAMBORNE

Polling conducted for the Inquiry found that white working class parents were significantly less likely than other groups to believe there were enough opportunities in their local areas for their children to succeed.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?: There are enough opportunities in my local area for my child to be successful



White working class young people were also less likely to expect to leave the areas where they grew up, reflecting both practical constraints and strong attachment to place, family and community identity.

Research participants repeatedly stressed that this attachment to place should not be interpreted as low aspiration. Instead, many described a desire for stable, meaningful and locally rooted futures, close to family, friends and community.

“ I love where I live. I don’t want my children to move away.

COMMUNITY ROUNDTABLE · GREAT YARMOUTH

“ I want to live around here when I grow up because it feels like home.

YEAR 5 PUPIL · PUPIL FOCUS GROUP

“ People don’t necessarily want to leave. They want opportunity where they are.

EXPERT EVIDENCE SESSION

However, at the same time, many young people described feeling physically and socially distant from opportunity. Weak transport infrastructure and limited local investment were frequently identified as major barriers to accessing education, training and employment. In many of the smaller towns and coastal communities where the Inquiry conducted research, opportunities existed beyond young people’s immediate areas, but often did not feel realistically accessible because of cost, distance or poor transport connectivity.

Alongside economic change, research participants also described a significant erosion of local youth and community infrastructure over time. The decline of youth clubs, family services, Sure Start centres and wider civic provision was repeatedly linked to weaker social connection, fewer positive activities for young people and greater disengagement from school.

“ When I was younger there were youth clubs everywhere. Now there’s almost nothing.

COMMUNITY IMMERSIVE · HARTLEPOOL

As wider services have declined, schools and colleges are perceived to be increasingly expected to absorb responsibilities that extend far beyond education. Teachers and leaders described schools acting simultaneously as educators, safeguarding services, food providers, mental health support and family hubs, often without the resources or infrastructure to do so sustainably.

“ We don’t just teach anymore.

TEACHER · SOUTH WEST FOCUS GROUP

However, despite this expanding role, many white working class communities still do not experience schools as fully embedded community institutions. While primary schools were more likely to be described as relational and community-centred, secondary schools were often experienced as more distant, less personal and less integrated into local identity and culture.

Research participants also described the importance of dignity, recognition and belonging within communities. Many spoke about wanting young people to feel proud of where they come from, while also believing that success and opportunity should be possible within those communities.

“ You only have to be in Knowsley for a few years and you understand the strength of that community and the loyalty of the people.

COMMUNITY ROUNDTABLE · KNOWSLEY

White working class educational outcomes are shaped both by what happens in schools and also the wider conditions of their lives. Long-term economic change, weakened community infrastructure and limited local opportunity all shape how education is experienced, valued and trusted.



Our Vision for Change

The Inquiry believes that the current experience of too many white working class children and young people is neither inevitable nor acceptable.

Across the research, we heard compelling evidence of children and young people who feel profoundly disconnected from education and uncertain about their future; families who no longer trust that education will lead to opportunity; and communities where confidence in institutions, including schools, has weakened over generations. Educational gaps, for white working class pupils, emerge early, widen over time, and are reinforced again and again at key transition points throughout childhood and adolescence.

However, the Inquiry also found strong evidence that outcomes are not fixed. There are schools and colleges – few, but glimmers of hope nonetheless – that achieve good outcomes for white working class young people. These institutions often deploy highly relational approaches built around high expectations, overcoming of barriers, provision of enriching experiences, and focus on relationships with families.

“It is about ensuring that all young people, regardless of background, skin colour, accent or postcode, feel that success is possible for people like them.”

The Inquiry therefore rejects the idea that underachievement amongst white working class pupils is inevitable. England has improved educational outcomes for historically underperforming groups before – including for pupils with English as an additional language and pupils in London – often through sustained focus, long-term investment, and collective effort across schools, families, communities and government. We believe the same level of ambition must now be applied to improving outcomes for white working class children and young people.

This is not simply about raising attainment, although that matters deeply. It is about rebuilding confidence that education can provide meaningful routes into adulthood, work, stability and a good life. It is about ensuring that all young people, regardless of background, skin colour, accent or postcode, feel that success is possible for people like them.

The Inquiry’s vision is therefore for an education system in which all children develop strong knowledge and qualifications, but also confidence, belonging, resilience and purpose. It is a vision of schools that are ambitious, relational and deeply connected to the communities they serve; of vocational and technical pathways that are high-quality, high-status and clearly linked to future opportunity; and of enrichment, sport, arts, culture and wider developmental experiences that are treated not as optional extras, but as central to helping children flourish.

Improving white working class educational outcomes will require more than school reform alone. It will require a long-term national effort involving schools, families, employers, further and higher education institutions, community organisations, funders, civic institutions and government itself. It will require rebuilding trust between schools and families, and restoring wider community infrastructure. It will also require investment in local economies and sustained action to create high-quality jobs, to ensure that children and young people can see visible and credible opportunities within the places they call home.

This is a generational challenge, but it is also a significant national opportunity. No country can thrive while large numbers of young people feel disconnected from opportunity, uncertain about their future, or unheard within the institutions designed to support them. A stronger education system for white working class children and young people would not only transform individual lives, but strengthen communities, improve social cohesion, support economic growth and renew confidence in the future of the country itself.

These recommendations are designed to address the specific barriers facing white working class communities, but they are also likely to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils more generally. There is an opportunity for this vision to be a key part of the evolution of the wider system in the years to come, driving improved outcomes in white working class communities and for all under-performing groups, wherever they live.

Ultimately, the Inquiry’s ambition is straightforward: an education system in which every child feels that they belong, that their talents and dreams are recognised, and that success is achievable for people like them. A system in which young people leave education with confidence, purpose and a clear route into a happy, productive adulthood.

The Inquiry believes that this ambition is achievable.



Our Recommendations

The scale, persistence and complexity of the white working class disadvantage gap mean there is no single policy, institution or intervention capable of resolving it alone.

The evidence gathered through this Inquiry points to a challenge that is deeply systemic and deeply entrenched. The recommendations set out in this report therefore reflect the scale of that challenge. They are intended not as a short-term package of isolated reforms, but as part of a broad, long-term, national effort to rebuild the white working class educational experience.

Improving outcomes for this group will require action across the whole system. Government has an essential role to play, but schools, colleges, universities, employers, local authorities, combined authorities, charities, community organisations, civic institutions, funders, researchers and families themselves will all need to contribute to this effort over many years. No single part of the system can solve these challenges alone.

This work must also endure beyond individual governments and political cycles. The challenges described in this report have developed over decades and will take many years to overcome. Sustained improvement will therefore require long-term commitment across successive governments, alongside stability, consistency and shared national ambition.

Some of the recommendations set out here could be implemented relatively quickly. Others will require significant investment, structural reform or longer-term system change. Together, they are intended to form the foundations of a decade-long national effort to close the white working class disadvantage gap and rebuild confidence that education is something to value, to enjoy, and to trust as a meaningful route to opportunity, stability and success.

The Inquiry also believes that improving outcomes for white working class children and young people must not solely become a conversation about deficits, problems and underachievement. Throughout this work, children, families and communities have spoken powerfully about the joy, pride, humour, identity and sense of community that comes with being white working class. The task is not to change these communities, but to build an education system that better recognises, values and builds upon the strengths already within them.

Finally, the Inquiry recognises that important gaps in evidence and understanding remain. White working class underachievement remains significantly under-researched relative to the scale of the challenge. Further research, evaluation and evidence-building will therefore be critical to improving outcomes over time. The Inquiry intends to continue contributing to this work beyond the publication of this report, including through further research, convening and collaboration across the education sector and beyond.

The recommendations that follow are split across 5 categories: recommendations that apply across the system, to early and primary education, to secondary education, to tertiary education, and to teachers.



Across the system

OPPORTUNITY

The Inquiry believes there is an opportunity to build a more consistent, evidence-led and inclusive education system that is better able to identify, understand and support white working class pupils across all phases of education. This means improving how disadvantage is understood and addressed, while strengthening the relationships, support systems and wider opportunities that underpin educational engagement and success. Crucially, this will require broad-based, sustained, coherent action from government, employers and education institutions, with key roles for wider civic society and philanthropic support.

AMBITION

To ensure that white working class pupils and families are consistently identified, understood and supported across the education system.

01 Improving how the system defines and prioritises white working class educational outcomes.

Government should establish a clearer and more operational definition of “white working class” in the context of education. Building on the commitments in the Schools White Paper around disadvantage funding, this should include embedding a broader range of socio-economic indicators within national datasets and accountability frameworks, including measures relating to household income, parental education, housing and long-term disadvantage, rather than relying too heavily on Free School Meal eligibility alone. **Government** should also strengthen how data is used to identify, track and plan action in **schools and trusts** serving white working class pupils, while promoting more open, confident, and evidence-led discussion of white working class educational outcomes across policy, practice and public discourse. Greater clarity and confidence in how the issue is understood and discussed is essential if organisations – including education institutions, employers, funders, charities and others – are to respond consistently, effectively, and as part of a joined-up effort across society.

02 Delivering a more inclusive approach to SEND and additional needs.

Government should implement the direction of reform set out in the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan and the Schools White Paper, recognising that the failures of the current SEND system disproportionately affect many white working class pupils and families. This should include driving much greater consistency and accountability across local SEND systems, improving access to early intervention and support, and making the system easier for families to navigate. **Government, trusts and schools** should drive consistent implementation of SEND reforms across the country, so that white working class families experience a more predictable and equitable system regardless of where they live. Without sustained implementation and investment, there is a significant risk that white working class pupils with additional needs will continue to experience poorer outcomes, higher exclusion rates and weaker engagement with education.

03 Developing a stronger national response to rising mental health challenges and excessive screen use.

Government should overhaul the current system of mental health and early intervention support for children and young people, including significantly improving access to CAMHS and wider mental health provision in white working class communities, where waiting times and unmet need are often greatest. **Government** should continue to drive much clearer national expectations on screen usage in schools, including a full ban on smartphones during the school day, alongside legislation to prevent under-16s from accessing social media platforms. This should be accompanied by much stronger support for schools and parents navigating online harms, addictive technologies and excessive screen use amongst children and young people.

04 Repositioning education as a shared endeavour between schools and families.

Government should build on the direction set out in the Schools White Paper to strengthen relationships between **schools and parents**, recognising that education works best when it is experienced as a shared endeavour, instead of something that is done to communities. Further research should be undertaken into the approaches most effective at engaging white working class families and sustaining long-term parental engagement, including identifying the school and trust practices most strongly associated with improved attendance, behaviour, belonging and parental trust. **Schools and trusts** should be expected and supported to develop more relational approaches to family engagement, building on the positive examples of this in the system. This could include more effective use of parents’ evenings, earlier and more consistent communication with families, and greater outreach beyond the school gate. In many white working class communities, **schools and trusts** are increasingly the most visible and accessible local institutions, and should therefore be supported to act as stronger civic anchors, acting as sources of support, connection and guidance for families, including through wider participation in enrichment, extracurricular and community activity beyond the classroom. **Government, trusts and schools** should place much greater emphasis on incorporating parent voice and family experience into national, local and school-level policy development, ensuring that families are treated as active partners in education rather than passive recipients of it.

05 Delivering a properly funded enrichment entitlement.

The direction of travel, set out in the Schools White Paper, towards an enrichment entitlement for every child is the right one. However, the current investment in this area is insufficient to generate the significant shift to provision that is needed. **Government** should provide substantial additional funding, recognising that access to enrichment, co-curricular activity and wider developmental opportunities is fundamental to engagement, belonging and long-term educational success. **Schools and trusts** serving white working class communities should then be expected and supported to provide significantly greater access to sport, arts, culture, volunteering, outdoor activity, employer engagement and wider developmental opportunities, backed by sustained long-term funding. Delivering this consistently may require a longer or differently structured school day in some schools and communities, alongside much stronger partnership working between **schools, employers, youth organisations, sports clubs, charities and cultural institutions** to ensure wider organisations support the delivery in schools. Because many white working class communities have experienced a significant erosion of youth and civic infrastructure over time, some schools and areas will require substantially greater public investment and implementation support than others to deliver high-quality enrichment opportunities consistently. Further research should be done to identify and understand the most effective approaches, and activity should be supported and facilitated by combined and local authorities.



OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Early and primary education

OPPORTUNITY

The Inquiry believes there is a major opportunity to place early literacy, language development and school readiness much more centrally within efforts to improve white working class educational outcomes. There is an opportunity to strengthen the white working class experience of early years and primary, across early years settings, schools and community provision, so that young people are ready to succeed at school from day one.

AMBITION

To ensure every white working class child arrives ready to succeed in Reception, and leaves primary school ready to thrive in secondary education, with the reading, language and communication skills needed to access the curriculum confidently and successfully.

Building a stronger national network of Best Start Family Hubs. 01

Government should significantly widen the Best Start Family Hubs programme to create a much larger, stronger and more consistent network of family support services in disadvantaged communities, similar to the scale achieved by the Sure Start programme. These hubs should bring together health, education, parenting and wider support services for families, drawing on the strongest elements of Sure Start, Family Hubs and Start for Life approaches. Best Start Family Hubs should work closely with **nurseries, childcare providers, schools and community organisations** to strengthen early intervention, support early reading, improve school readiness and rebuild parental engagement with education. Particular focus should be placed on white working class communities experiencing long-term disadvantage, where wider family and community infrastructure has often weakened most significantly over time.

Extending 30 hours' free childcare to all disadvantaged families not currently eligible. 02

Government should extend access to 30 hours' free childcare to disadvantaged families who are not currently eligible under the existing working-parent criteria. High-quality early years provision plays a critical role in children's speech, language, social development and school readiness, yet many children in white working class communities currently have least access to it. The current system, in which the full entitlement is largely restricted to families where both parents are working, risks further entrenching disadvantage in white working class communities where insecure employment, unemployment and economic inactivity are often higher. Expansion should therefore be prioritised towards disadvantaged communities and accompanied by a renewed focus on the quality and consistency of early years provision in the places where developmental gaps emerge earliest and are hardest to close. This should include greater investment in the early years workforce to support the recruitment and retention of high-quality staff.

03 Strengthening transition into primary school and support for families.

Government should work with **schools, early years providers and local systems** to create a much clearer and more consistent transition into primary school, particularly in white working class communities where school readiness challenges are greatest. This should include stronger expectations around communication and engagement between **schools and families** before children start Reception, clearer guidance for **parents** on preparing children for school, more structured sharing of information between nurseries, early years **providers and schools**, and a stronger role for **schools and trusts** as trusted sources of support for families during the early years. Further research should be undertaken to identify what excellent transition engagement looks like in this context, so that these approaches can be utilised at scale. **Government** should consider confirming primary school placements earlier in the year, so that schools can build trusted relationships with white working class families over a longer period, helping children arrive at school with greater confidence, familiarity and readiness to learn.

04 Making reading fluency a national priority for white working class children.

Government should make reading fluency a central priority within its strategy for improving educational outcomes for white working class pupils. This should include additional targeted support, to ensure that all white working class children meet the expected standard in the Phonics Screening Check as early as possible, alongside rapid and sustained intervention – including access to small group tutoring – for those who fall behind. However, passing the Phonics Screening Check alone is not sufficient to develop confident readers who can fully access the wider curriculum. **Government** should therefore place much greater emphasis on supporting teachers to develop reading fluency, oracy, and a genuine enjoyment of reading throughout primary school, ensuring that children are regularly exposed to books, discussion, and high-quality, language-rich teaching. **Government** should consider whether the current Key Stage 2 reading assessment gives an accurate picture of a child's reading fluency and readiness to access the secondary curriculum. Every white working class child should leave primary school able to access the secondary curriculum confidently and independently, without carrying unresolved literacy gaps into secondary school.



OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Secondary education

OPPORTUNITY

The Inquiry believes there is an opportunity to reimagine secondary education as a phase in which all young people experience education as meaningful, engaging and linked to future opportunity. This means supporting and resourcing schools to combine strong academic expectations with high-quality enrichment, meaningful careers education, and clear pathways into adulthood, while ensuring that all pupils feel a strong sense of belonging and success within school.

AMBITION

To ensure every white working class young person experiences a secondary education that is engaging, supportive, aspirational and connected to their future.

01

Reforming the transition from primary to secondary school.

Alongside improving the experience of the early secondary years, **Government, trusts and schools** should strengthen how transition from primary to secondary school is organised and experienced. Further research should identify, evaluate and share the transition approaches most effective at supporting white working class pupils, while trusts and schools should treat transition as a carefully managed period of continuity, relationship-building and support, rather than a short administrative process at the end of Year 6. This should include much stronger and more consistent information-sharing between **primary and secondary schools**, ensuring that children’s individual needs, preferences, support strategies and family circumstances transfer effectively so that pupils and parents do not feel they are being forced to “start again” on entering secondary school. **Schools and trusts** should also engage parents much more proactively throughout transition, helping families feel informed, engaged and confident as children move into secondary education.

02

Reprioritising Key Stage 3 as a critical phase of secondary education.

Government, trusts and schools should place much more emphasis on Key Stage 3 as a distinct and critical phase of education, rather than primarily as preparation for GCSE study. Years 7 to 9 are too often deprioritised within school improvement and accountability systems, despite evidence that engagement, attendance, behaviour and confidence all decline significantly at this point, particularly for white working class pupils. **Schools and trusts** should place much greater emphasis on the quality of teaching, pastoral support and wider school experience during Key Stage 3, particularly in Year 7. This should include building much stronger links between transition, enrichment activity and pastoral support to ensure pupils remain engaged throughout the early secondary years. Further research, including through the Government’s new KS3 RISE Alliance, should identify the approaches most effective at sustaining engagement and belonging during Key Stage 3.

03

Strengthening curriculum delivery at Key Stage 4.

All pupils should have access to a well-designed, knowledge-rich curriculum that provides a strong academic foundation and expands opportunity. Evidence suggests that, in many schools serving white working class communities, the challenge is not the curriculum itself, but ensuring that it is delivered in ways that are consistently engaging, meaningful and accessible for pupils. **Government, trusts and schools** should therefore invest further in subject expertise, curriculum leadership and instructional coaching in schools serving white working class communities, particularly in English and Mathematics, to support teachers to make the curriculum feel more relevant and connected to pupils’ lives and future opportunities. Further research should be undertaken to identify how schools achieving the strongest outcomes in white working class communities successfully engage pupils with a strong academic curriculum, and how this practice can be shared more widely. **Government** should place much greater emphasis on Key Stage 3 within school improvement, curriculum development and evidence-building activity, ensuring that pupils build secure academic foundations ahead of the transition to Key Stage 4. This should include stronger evaluation of how schools successfully sustain engagement, attendance and curriculum access during the early secondary years, and greater sharing of effective practice across the system.

04

Developing high-quality vocational and applied pathways at Key Stage 4.

Government should develop and test how high-quality vocational and applied pathways at Key Stage 4 can be integrated more effectively alongside a strong academic core. This should include further research into stronger employer engagement, clearer progression routes into post-16 education, training and employment, and appropriate recognition within the wider accountability system. All young people should have access to ambitious and meaningful pathways that help them to understand the routes available into further study, technical education and skilled employment, and support them to make informed choices about the future. Any expansion of vocational and applied options should complement, rather than replace, strong academic expectations for all pupils.

05 Improving careers education in schools and making learning feel more relevant to pupils' futures.

Government, employers, trusts and schools should strengthen careers education and employer engagement throughout secondary school, particularly in communities where young people are least likely to see a clear connection between education and later opportunity. This should include introducing meaningful careers education much earlier in primary and secondary school, significantly improving access to high-quality work experience linked to local employers and industries, and ensuring that pupils have a clearer understanding of the post-16 pathways available to them. **Employers** should also be expected and incentivised to play a much more active role in careers engagement, work experience and exposure to local industries and occupations, facilitated by **combined and local authorities, alongside trusts and schools**. **Schools and trusts** should place much greater emphasis on helping pupils understand why they are learning what they are learning and how it connects to future opportunities, local labour markets and adult life. Careers education should also be supported by wider enrichment opportunities, employer engagement and meaningful exposure to different pathways and professions. Further research should be undertaken to understand how careers education has been successfully designed and delivered to support improved destinations in white working class areas.

06 Ensuring every young person leaves school or college with a clear destination and is prepared for the transition.

Government should reform school and college accountability measures so that successful progression into apprenticeships, technical education, employment and further study is valued equally alongside progression to university. While schools and colleges are already required to publish destinations measures, these remain heavily weighted towards progression into higher education. **Government** should strengthen existing destinations measures so that they place much greater emphasis on progression into apprenticeships, technical education, skilled employment and Level 4+ technical routes alongside university progression. **Government** should also introduce a stronger focus on sustained and longer-term destinations outcomes within accountability frameworks, so that schools and colleges are judged not only on immediate post-16 or post-18 destinations, but on whether young people remain successfully engaged in education, employment or training over time. **Schools and colleges** should be expected to demonstrate that all young people have a clear and credible progression plan before leaving compulsory education and that they have been adequately prepared for the transition out of school or college. No white working class young person should leave school without a clear destination.

Widening access to the highest performing schools.

07

Government should encourage and support more deliberate action to ensure that the highest performing primary and secondary schools admit and support a fair share of disadvantaged pupils, particularly in areas with significant white working class populations. Too often, the highest performing schools within local areas serve intakes that are significantly less disadvantaged than the communities around them. This should include clearer guidance and encouragement for schools and trusts to prioritise disadvantaged pupils within existing admissions rules, alongside stronger expectations that high-performing schools demonstrate how they are contributing to inclusion and fair access locally. **Local authorities** should also play a stronger role in supporting fair access, admissions coordination and inclusive place planning, building on their existing statutory responsibilities in this area. **High-performing schools and trusts** should be expected and supported to engage much earlier with families in white working class communities, including more pro-active, pre-application communication with prospective parents, and greater support helping families understand and navigate admissions processes before key transition points. **Government and local systems** should encourage stronger local partnerships and voluntary compacts between schools to strengthen collective responsibility for inclusion and disadvantage within local areas.



Empowering FE colleges to be high-quality, local engines of progression. 01

Government should empower **FE colleges** to be the central institutions within local tertiary education systems, backed by significantly greater investment in teaching quality, facilities, and long-term employer partnerships. This should include greater investment in the FE workforce to support the recruitment and retention of high-quality staff. FE should no longer be treated as a lower status alternative to university, but as a high-quality route into skilled work, technical education and further study. FE colleges play a critical role in re-engaging young people and adults who have become disconnected from education earlier in life, providing flexible and locally accessible opportunities to learn and access progression pathways. Improving the status of FE should include creating clearer progression pathways into Levels 4, 5 and 6, stronger alignment between local FE provision and local growth sectors, and a much stronger role for FE colleges in brokering relationships between schools, employers, universities and training providers. Expansion of technical and vocational education must also be accompanied by much stronger quality expectations and clearer links to skilled employment and local labour market demand.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

▣ Tertiary education

OPPORTUNITY

The Inquiry believes there is an opportunity to move towards a more coherent and flexible tertiary education system. This means moving away from a system built around binary choices between education and employment and towards one that enables young people to move more flexibly between further education, higher education, apprenticeships, technical training and employment. It means building a system in which technical and vocational pathways are high-status, high-quality, locally relevant, clearly understood and genuinely linked to employment opportunity. It is crucial that employers, government and the education system work together coherently and systematically to deliver on these opportunities.

AMBITION

To ensure every white working class young person can see and access a clear route to a successful future.

Massively expanding apprenticeship opportunities in white working class communities. 02

Government should massively expand the apprenticeship opportunities available for young people in white working class communities, particularly by making it significantly easier for **SMEs** to recruit apprentices. There has been a repeated, systemic failure to deliver the scale of opportunity promised in this area, and **Government** should take urgent action to improve this. This should include simplifying levy transfers, reducing administrative burden, providing greater long-term funding certainty, and introducing stronger financial incentives for SMEs recruiting younger apprentices in white working class areas. **Combined authorities** should be given clearer responsibility and funding to broker apprenticeship opportunities locally, connecting schools, colleges, employers and training providers more systematically. At the same time, apprenticeships need to become much easier for young people and families to understand and access, including through stronger careers guidance, meaningful work experience linked to local industries, significantly greater support with applications and transitions into work-based learning, and provision for those who are not yet ready to take on an apprenticeship. **Government** should review apprenticeship standards and funding rules to ensure they better reflect local labour markets and support progression into a wider range of skilled occupations, while removing barriers created by transport costs and disincentives, such as those within the benefits system.

03 Reimagining higher education and Level 4+ pathways to prioritise flexibility, locality and work.

Government and higher education providers should move beyond a system dominated by the traditional three-year residential degree and expand more flexible routes that allow young people to combine work and study over time. This should include significantly expanding modular and commuter-based provision, strengthening Level 4 and 5 pathways, and creating clearer progression routes between FE, HE, technical education and employment. **Universities** should be incentivised to align provision more closely with local labour markets and growth sectors, collaborating with **FE colleges** to do so, including through employer-backed degrees, work-integrated learning and stronger pathways into internships or graduate-entry opportunities linked to local industries. **Employers** should also be expected to co-design and co-deliver more locally rooted higher and technical pathways linked to workforce need. Young people should be able to access high-quality higher education and technical progression without feeling they must leave home, take on excessive financial risk, or follow a single linear route.

04 Reducing the financial risks associated with further and higher study.

Government should significantly strengthen maintenance and living-cost support for disadvantaged young people progressing into higher education and technical study and communicate this clearly to families. This should include clearer financial support for work-study pathways, targeted support with accommodation and travel costs, and greater use of bursaries, scholarships and **employer** co-investment to reduce the perceived and real financial risks associated with further and higher study. This should involve the piloting and testing of high potential initiatives that specifically support more white working class young people to pursue further and higher education, including place-based approaches. **Government** should do much more to reduce the financial insecurity that currently deters many white working class young people from progressing beyond compulsory education and ensure this is well understood by white working class communities.

05 Introducing free access to local public transport for all under 21s.

Government should introduce free access to local public transport for all young people up to the age of 21, building on the successful trialling of this in some parts of the country, and recognising that transport costs are a major barrier to accessing education, training and employment opportunities, particularly in white working class communities. **Combined authorities and local systems** should be required to align transport planning more closely with local education and skills provision, ensuring that young people can realistically access colleges, apprenticeships and employment opportunities beyond their immediate area.



OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers

OPPORTUNITY

The Inquiry has identified high quality teaching as the single biggest lever for improving outcomes for white working class pupils. Schools achieving strong outcomes were consistently characterised by excellent teaching and leadership, strong relationships and high expectations, alongside teachers who were able to make education feel meaningful and relevant to young people’s futures. There is therefore an opportunity to strengthen both the quality and composition of the teacher workforce in white working class communities. This includes supporting more white working class young people to enter teaching, building stronger local teacher pipelines with subject-specific expertise, and ensuring that teachers and leaders working in these communities receive the support and development needed to succeed. Improving wider conditions within schools and communities should also help schools recruit and retain excellent teachers in the places they are needed most.

AMBITION

To ensure every white working child has access to high-quality teaching that feels relevant, aspirational and connected to their lives and communities.

01 Building local teacher pipelines through a reformed Teacher Degree Apprenticeship.

Government should work with teacher **training providers, trusts and schools** to create stronger local pipelines into teaching in white working class communities facing the greatest workforce challenges. This should include reforming the Teacher Degree Apprenticeship into a more flexible '2 plus 2' pathway, in which trainees first complete a two-year Level 5 Specialist Teaching Assistant Apprenticeship before progressing, through recognition of prior learning, into a two-year route to Qualified Teacher Status and Level 6. This would create a more accessible and local route into teaching, including for those who do not already hold a degree. It would also help schools to recruit and retain a stable and consistent workforce with strong local knowledge and long-term commitment to both teaching and the communities they serve.

02 More targeting of existing teacher recruitment and retention support to the communities facing the greatest workforce challenges.

Government should move from broad national approaches to teacher recruitment and retention towards a more explicitly place-based strategy, targeting support at the schools and communities where workforce challenges and disadvantage are most acute. Existing incentives – including bursaries, salary uplifts and retention payments – should be directed more deliberately towards these areas, alongside improved use of workforce and school capacity data to identify need and test the effectiveness of these approaches. **Trusts and local systems** should also be supported, including through longer-term funding settlements, to develop longer-term workforce planning and retention strategies, helping schools serving white working class communities to build more stable and experienced teaching workforces over time.

03 Reviewing training and development to better reflect the realities of teaching in white working class communities.

Government should use upcoming reviews of the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Frameworks, National Professional Qualifications and the CEO Development Framework to ensure that teacher development better equips teachers and leaders to understand and navigate the realities of working in white working class communities. **Teacher training providers** should place stronger focus on how to make the strong academic curriculum feel relevant and connected to the futures white working class families aspire to, how to build trust and engagement with parents and communities, and how schools and trusts can increasingly operate as trusted, community-based anchor institutions. Further research should identify effective approaches to teacher development used by schools already achieving strong outcomes for white working class pupils, ensuring these practices are embedded more consistently across the system.



Conclusion

The challenge set out in this report is significant. Closing the white working class disadvantage gap will not be easy. It will require long-term commitment, sustained political focus, and collective and relentless national effort over many years. It will require schools, colleges, universities, families, employers, charities, communities, civic society and government all working together with shared purpose and urgency. It will also require a broader understanding of educational success that places greater emphasis on fostering belonging, engagement, purpose and links to future opportunity, alongside attainment itself. Most importantly, it will require rebuilding confidence that education can still provide a meaningful route to a good life.

The Inquiry believes that England is capable of doing this. The country has improved outcomes for other underperforming groups before, often through sustained focus, investment and system-wide reform. There is no reason why the same ambition should not now be applied to improving outcomes for white working class children and young people.

This matters not just because of the lives and futures directly affected, although that alone should be reason enough. It matters because no country can thrive while large numbers of its young people feel so disconnected from opportunity, uncertain about their future, and unable to see where they fit within society. A stronger education system for white working class children and young people would not only transform individual outcomes, but strengthen communities, support economic growth, improve social cohesion, and help restore confidence in the future of the country itself. Ultimately, this is not only about educational outcomes. It is about the kind of country we want England to be.

No child should grow up feeling that success in school is possible for other people, but not for them. No young person should leave education believing that opportunity exists elsewhere, but not within their own reach. And no community should feel that educational success and economic security are increasingly out of reach for the people who live there.

Now that we better understand the problem and what it will take to resolve it, the task now is to act on it – with the seriousness, urgency and long-term commitment it requires and deserves.

End notes

1. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/ce0dc9ad-23b1-48ce-f439-08deb23852d3>
2. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/34e9d57b-8ab6-4b2c-c5bc-08deb20526ae>
3. Department for Work and Pensions (2026) Young people and work: interim report. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report>
4. For consistency with national education datasets and the polling undertaken for this Inquiry, references to “white working class” throughout this report refer to white British pupils and families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. The Inquiry does not separately analyse the experiences of other white ethnic groups. We also recognise that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and families face distinct and significant educational barriers. Their experiences sit outside the scope of this Inquiry.
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools-and-local-authorities/free-school-meals-guidance-for-local-authorities-local-authority-maintained-schools-academies-and-free-schools>
6. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/08243e6a-858c-4a22-1352-08dec5bb9009>
7. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/639daf3b-2e66-4d96-f437-08deb23852d3>
8. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/0a7b0bf6-1cc0-4fc2-c5bd-08deb20526ae>
9. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/ce0dc9ad-23b1-48ce-f439-08deb23852d3>
10. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/ce0dc9ad-23b1-48ce-f439-08deb23852d3>

* sample sizes for non-white C2DE were too small and have been excluded from these graphs

