

Roundtables

School and College Leaders

Roundtables

June 2026



01 Introduction

As part of the Inquiry, we have convened a series of roundtables with school and college leaders. The first convened school headteacher from across the country in schools serving high proportions of white working class students, the second did similarly for CEOs of Multi Academy Trusts and the third convened college CEOs. Each online roundtable lasted 90 minutes and was facilitated by a member of the Public First research team. All insights have been anonymised.

The Inquiry into White Working Class Educational Outcomes undertook a series of three roundtables with school and college leaders. The first convened school headteacher from across the country in schools serving high proportions of white working class students, the second did similarly for CEOs of Multi Academy Trusts and the third convened college CEOs.

Participants were identified through National Pupil Database school-level data. The roundtables were held online, and lasted for 90 minutes, facilitated by a member of the Public First research team. There were four key questions posed for discussion, although each session followed a semi structured format, guided by the expertise and insight provided by participants:

1. What data do you use to identify demographic groups in your schools/colleges? How would you identify 'white working class' young people?
2. What do you see in your schools/colleges as the key factors driving underperformance of white working-class children and young people?
3. What do you think works in your schools/colleges to improve the outcomes of white working class children and young people?
4. What support would you find helpful from external organisations or Government to help you to improve the outcomes of the white working class young people in your schools/colleges?

02 Key Takeaways

1. **Leaders across all three sessions felt that “white working class” disadvantage is wider than poverty, and current data misses much of the cohort.** FSM, pupil premium and free college meal data are too blunt, so leaders rely on postcode, deprivation, family history, SEND, attendance, behaviour and local knowledge to identify need.
2. **The underperformance challenge is rooted in disengagement that often begins early,** intensifies through Key Stage 3, and arrives in FE as a re-engagement crisis.
3. **Curriculum relevance was seen as central to engagement, with vocational and applied pathways often doing what the academic curriculum fails to do.** Many felt pupils struggle to see how academic study connects to their futures, while practical routes often rebuild motivation.
4. **Family attitudes matter, but leaders framed this less as parental apathy than as mistrust, low confidence and different forms of aspiration.** Negative school experiences and limited system knowledge can affect attendance, expectations and progression.
5. **The strongest solutions combine high-quality teaching with relationships, wraparound support and wider community infrastructure,** but leaders felt schools and colleges cannot sustain this alone.

03 Roundtable 1 – School Leaders

1. The existing system level data does not provide granular insight for leaders to identify and target disadvantage above the FSM threshold

Free school meals and pupil premium data significantly understate need. Many white working-class families sit just above the pupil premium threshold, working in unstable or low-paid jobs without qualifying for support. Postcodes, deprivation indicators, immunisation rates, food bank use, mobility patterns and family histories are often more accurate markers of need.

*“To qualify for pupil premium is exceptionally low. A family income, I mean, like, staggeringly low... and then if you just go above that **we've got rafts of families that are surviving on just above that pupil premium with no real way of highlighting them as falling into that category.**”* – CEO of a large MAT in the East Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber, several schools with >40% White British FSM.

*“For us, actually, it's probably easier to identify a lot of them by a post code, so **geographically I know if they are within that area of my catchment, they are likely to be white working class.**”* – Headteacher in the East Midlands, 50-60% White British FSM

“We look at very much at the immunisation rates actually in the areas they come from, what's the sort of poverty, the access to food banks, the sort of medical needs and things like that. So we get a lot of data around the deprivation data.” – Headteacher in the West Midlands, 40-50% White British FSM

2. Attendance is a key factor driving the underperformance of white working class children and young people

Attendance was repeatedly described as the single biggest predictor of success. But challenges range from EBSA, anxiety and mental health claims and some parents enabling low attendance by keeping children home for comfort or company.

Several leaders described SEND and anxiety, particularly among white working class girls, as intensifying absence and disengagement.

*“If they have over 95% attendance, they stack up really well against any of the other schools with a much better context. **But if they're not there, and we can't do anything with them, it is a massive issue.**”* – Deputy Headteacher in the North East, 40-50% White British FSM

"When we've got staff knocking on doors... the child is willing to go, but the parent doesn't want them to go and they want them with them that day." – Headteacher in the North West, 50-60% White British FSM

"Our girls are increasingly more anxious and are showing emotional based school avoidance. Where the boys will come into school and will misbehave to mask their lower literacy levels - we know that they're in school, they still get their literacy interventions, even if they've been in inclusion interventions, we'd still let them go and have that. Whereas the girls are displaying anxiety, citing mental health - and then their attendance is really low, and they're supported by home who, **when we try and engage with parents and carers, they just go 'Look my child is anxious. They're suffering with mental health. They're not going to be in. So don't keep coming around my house because I don't want to engage.'**" – Headteacher in the North East, 60-70% White British FSM

3. Behaviour is often a rational strategy to avoid learning, not random disruption

Behaviour is perceived to be used strategically. Pupils consciously refuse to participate in lessons they dislike or believe are irrelevant. Some Year 11s were seen to "down tools" in subjects not perceived to be required for their chosen post-16 routes.

"Behaviour is a significant barrier to achievement – not being able to self regulate and in many instances doing everything they can to get out of school to be suspended." – Headteacher in the East Midlands, 50-60% White British FSM

*"We tend to see, in our supervision or our inclusion room, it is predominantly white, pupil premium boys and they are trapped in a cycle of behaviour. They're in that supervision room, get given lots of support to get out of it, but just **do not want to engage, don't want to go to lessons, and will misbehave and be back in there.**"* – Headteacher in the North East, 60-70% White British FSM

4. Curriculum relevance is also a reported barrier, with vocational pathways key to drawing students in

Leaders argued that curriculum relevance is central to engagement. Key Stage 3 curriculum narrowing, driven by literacy and numeracy intervention demands, has squeezed out subjects students enjoy. They believe this has harmed engagement. Pupils respond strongly to vocational options, yet accountability pressures, including recent changes to performance measures, risk removing the very courses that keep them in school.

"I don't feel there's a particular lack of ambition. I feel it's more of a lack of relevance of the curriculum. For example, we have a student who wants to be a vehicle mechanic. I think they struggle to connect the dots between the relevance of year eight history to that ambition that they've got. So it's the relevance of what they're doing for all of those hours in school and how that connects

to the goal and the dream that they've got." – Headteacher in the North West, 50-60% White British FSM

"So not going down the stereotypical sort of route – white working class boy will want to read about football for example. So actually broadening and being aware of a real range of different interests amongst boys, girls. And trying to put something on the menu which resonates with them beyond those kind of stereotypical views." – Headteacher in the North West, 50-60% White British FSM

*"Some of the students are put off coming into school because they're in those same subjects over and over again. But **if I put vocational subjects on - construction, engineering, things that our students see as relevant - they're in all of the time**, and that links back to the attendance as well.*

***In Key Stage 3, we seem to have squeezed out all of those subjects that the students really enjoy in favour of getting those basics and the intervention right to make sure that their standards of literacy and numeracy are where we need them to be** to enable them to have success, and I don't know whether we've done the right thing there by all of our students when they could have been a different way."* – Headteacher in Yorkshire and the Humber, 30-40% White British FSM

5. Local labour markets compete with school: employment feels more real than qualifications

Leaders describe pupils whose aspirations sit outside education, preferring the idea of working with parents, and the instant gratification of taking cash jobs. This immediacy of wages, combined with uncertain future job markets, erodes the case for long-term study in the eyes of young people.

*"Many of our students, when they are in year 8 or year 9, they're starting to have their first part time job where they see quick cash in hand and many of our students then say, well, **I'm working so many hours and I earned £70 over the weekend. Why should I bother? Why should I revise or why should I attend your revision? What's the point?**"* – Headteacher in the East Midlands, 50-60% White British FSM

*"When you talk about aspirations, **the aspirations are often 'I'm going to go and work for my dad, therefore I only need my grade fours to get to college, to do my apprenticeship because my dad doesn't have grades, he's running a business, I'll go and work for him'**. And actually a lot of the aspirations are around that. So, whereas we're doing work experience, university visits, all of those bits that you would do to raise aspirations, they see that early gratification in terms of getting a pay packet, because they can go and work with family. And actually we can do lots of those things, but that money coming into that household to pay for food, to pay for the bills is absolutely good."* – Headteacher in the East Midlands, 50-60% White British FSM

“Personally I think that there’s better offers these days than when I was younger - with apprenticeships and different routes into work, I don’t think university is the be all and end all. They don’t see relevance of the end point and it’s not all about university, so why am I doing geography to go and be a hairdresser?” - Deputy Headteacher in the North East, 40-50% White British FSM

“I think you know when we’re talking around pupils who are talking around, well, if I go to university, I’m going to come out with £50-60k debt when actually, I don’t know what that job is going to be like in the future.” – Headteacher in the West Midlands, 40-50% White British FSM

“We saw on results day that lots of parents had no expectations of their children to pass their GCSEs. So it’s a problem because they don’t see university in their future at all. These are parents and carers who were shocked that they even passed - before they opened them, they all said, ‘Don’t worry, I don’t have any GCSEs, so it doesn’t matter if you fail, it’s fine. I don’t have any. Your mum doesn’t have any.’ And we heard that conversation a lot on the day.

So, I think we’re trying to change a culture where people normally haven’t passed their GCSE, so they’ve never really thought that university was something in their pathway that they could aspire to go. And I feel like we’re really trying our hardest to change that. And for the students that are in the area for them to see that university is something that they can aspire to go to and we can help guide them on that pathway. But it’s really hard when you’re faced with that generational, persistent of lack of educational success and they don’t see that for their child either.” – Headteacher in the North East, 60-70% White British FSM

6. Identity vacuum and belonging challenges: WWC pupils lack a positive cultural anchor

Leaders described a lack of identity among white working-class pupils. They linked this to the increased raising of flags and other attempts to signal belonging. This identity gap makes it harder for schools to build pride, community and aspiration.

“I think some of that [flying of flags] can be attributed to a group that are really wanting to establish an identity... We’ve been doing a lot of work around diversity and inclusion in my school and we have cultural events and culture theme days. And it’s the white working class pupils that don’t know what to wear when it comes to culture day. So there’s definitely something around that belonging and engagement there as well.” – Headteacher in the West Midlands, 40-50% White British FSM

“It’s around that first thousand days of child development. A lot of our pupils come in with that 30-million-word gap. They haven’t had the cultural capital experiences. They don’t have the basics that their peers would have as well. So, I think the inequality starts from that moment onwards.” – Headteacher in the West Midlands, 40-50% White British FSM

7. Parental disengagement runs deep — mistrust, hostility, low expectations and tactical school movement

Parents' own educational experiences, as well as their interactions with their children's school and education can create a culture of mistrust with schools; some move children between schools or into elective home education when behaviour or attendance issues arise. This churn breaks relationships and disrupts support which compounds disadvantage.

Some parents are openly hostile, undermining staff in front of their child. Multiple schools report generational educational failure, with parents telling pupils that GCSEs "don't matter" because they never had them either. Leaders also note a lingering post-pandemic mistrust of institutions, which has prompted more creative approaches to engagement, including parents' evenings in pubs, social media outreach, meals at events and community-centred activities.

*"I think that we're all working with unmeasurable influences to do with local cultures and generational lack of ambition and unemployment and the value that's placed on education and the influence that parents have on their children and their ability to engage with school. **And I think there's tiers and tiers of challenge that you can't measure or that don't show up on them on data.**"* - CEO of a large MAT in the East Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber, several with >40% White British FSM.

*"Lots of these parents have a sort of adverse reaction to the school. I think it's like hospitals or something. So, for our parents who we've never seen I'm going to go and do a parents evening [at the local pub around next to school] just to say, all teachers aren't like you remember teachers, school's not like you remember school. **But I want to talk to you about your child and that's important. So, if I have to come to the pub to do it, I am going to.**"* – Deputy Headteacher in the North East, 40-50% White British FSM

*"**Mobility for us in our area is a massive issue. So and it's not mobility in and out of the area, it's mobility between the schools within the area...** you might be challenging them on attendance, on behaviour, all the things we've just been talking about and the parent will go 'well actually, I don't like that, so I'm going to move them to this school now', and then they get a similar challenge there. So, they move them to that school and then they might go for a period of elective home education."* – Headteacher in the East Midlands, 50-60% White British FSM

*"The whole collapse of the mining industry... we're still suffering from that because **we're on 2nd and 3rd generations of unemployment and low ambition and a lack of trust in education.**"* - CEO of a large MAT in the East Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber, several with >40% White British FSM.

*"**The parents aren't ambitious about the outcomes and the academic outcomes for the children, but they are ambitious about the kids feeling safe and happy in school.**"* - CEO of a

large MAT in the East Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber, several with >40% White British FSM.

“Parents expectations of what they think is right and won't back down is reflected in their children – who can be verbally abusive... parents will vehemently disagree with you in front of their young person.” – Headteacher in the East Midlands, 50-60% White British FSM

*“I just feel so strongly about parental engagement because I'm white working class, council estate born. **But the difference between my upbringing and somebody else's for me to go to university was my mum and dad really valued education.**”* – Deputy Headteacher in the North East, 40-50% White British FSM

8. Staffing fragility is a key challenge

Leaders described direct links between staffing instability, behaviour, curriculum breadth and outcomes. Pupils experience disrupted teaching, and schools struggle to rebuild cultures of learning when recruitment pipelines break down.

“I think actually sometimes an underperformance factor for this group is that the school is struggling to recruit and it's struggling to retain staff and that then has an impact on how the school is. If the behaviour is not right, then that has an impact in retaining staff and the culture of an Academy.” – Headteacher in the North East, 60-70% White British FSM

9. Belonging, relationships, wraparound, visible leadership and enrichment that gets them through the door

The most effective approaches leaders identified:

- daily enrichment to motivate attendance
- key adults (“champions”) who anchor relationships
- visible, in-class senior leadership
- praise-heavy cultures
- in-house social workers
- later-evening online revision sessions
- wraparound care and extended days
- strong transition models
- partnerships with sports clubs or employers
- use of positive, low-stakes social media to share success and build trust
- Relocating some activity to community settings where parents feel more comfortable

Collectively, these approaches focus on getting pupils in, building trust, and creating reasons to stay.

"We've been doing a lot of work across all of the schools in [the area]... there's been a project about the importance of education, health care, all of those big deprivation indicators starting almost back to almost what the Sure Start centres used to do. They're trying to do that within a community locally where GP surgeries are working with schools and GP surgeries are talking to schools about attendance. Where you've got parents saying 'my child's too ill to come to school', actually the GP surgeries are saying 'no, they're not', and facilitating those conversations." – Headteacher in the East Midlands, 50-60% White British FSM

"Having a social worker in school... has meant that certain issues can be dealt with much swifter." – Headteacher in the North West, 50-60% White British FSM

*"Strong leadership, visible leadership being out in lessons all of the time... praise postcards, principals praise, praise Friday... positive phone calls home every single day... **students became more engaged because they were receiving the positivity that they perhaps haven't had previously**"* – Headteacher in the North East, 60-70% White British FSM

"If we can actually give them an enrichment opportunity every single day... that will make them want to come to school and once they're in school, they're engaged, they enjoy it, they feel like they belong... achievement actually grow... e.g. year 11 girls fitness, chess club every day, football every day..." – Headteacher in the West Midlands, 40-50% White British FSM

*"What we have found being very useful, is assigning a key adult to the students who is a **champion for the student** - who is doing the check in the morning, who's asking how things have been, who's also the main point of contact with the families and has established the relationship with the parents and is the key person for the student throughout the school day as well - if something needs to be done, if there is an issue that needs to be resolved - and someone who's just showing an interest and actually makes it worthwhile come for the student to come to school. [Then the student] doesn't want to disappoint the adult and wants to work for the adult. **And they share and celebrate your successes as well.**"* – Headteacher in the East Midlands, 50-60% White British FSM

10. Transition support, especially Year 6 to 7 and Year 11 to post-16, is crucial

Transition was seen as a crucial point of vulnerability and opportunity. Extended transition windows help build trust and reduce fear for both pupils and parents. Some leader shared that they employ summer NEET-prevention mentors to stop Year 11 leavers "disappearing" before September. Early relationship-building, including SENCOs and key staff visiting primary schools, was seen as particularly valuable.

*"We've employed NEET prevention mentors who are contracted to work over the summer and pick up those year 11s and **work with them and their families to give them the confidence to actually***

turn up at College in September... *that's been really successful.*" - CEO of a large MAT in the East Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber, several with >40% White British FSM.

"Our year six to seven transition has been a three-week transition period, which actually means that you're getting them in and getting them settled before that summer holiday when they suddenly think they're going to be pushed down the toilets when they get to year seven in September - they get past that bit, but the parents get past that too, because I even I know when my daughter first started in year seven, that first day in secondary school is quite nerve wracking, isn't it? For you as the parent. So being able to iron out a lot of those issues in that three weeks actually made quite a lot of difference." – Headteacher in the East Midlands, 50-60% White British FSM

*"[By having teachers going out into primary schools, parents] already know key staff names. They already know who to phone up and speak to. **They don't feel that they're ringing and speaking to a nameless building.**"* – Headteacher in the East Midlands, 50-60% White British FSM

"We have quite a large percentage who don't apply for a secondary school who are chased by the local authority to say that you still haven't applied and then the local authority will put them here and the parents have no desire to come in the school, no desire to sort of engage with the year 6 open induction evening or come and join us for the induction days that the year 6 come on." – Headteacher in the North East, 60-70% White British FSM

11. A holistic approach to community services and support was seen as essential to improve outcomes

Leaders asked for:

- funding for support staff and enrichment
- reliable mental health provision on-site
- restored youth services and early help
- support for parents, particularly during early years
- easier access to charities and third-sector support (especially in rural/coastal areas)
- community infrastructure to share responsibility for pupils' welfare

They emphasise that many of these supports exist in urban areas but are absent in coastal, rural and post-industrial towns.

"Youth services, community infrastructure, early help, adult social care." – Headteacher in the West Midlands, 40-50% White British FSM

"A greater prevalence of health services on school sites." – Headteacher in the North West, 50-60% White British FSM

*"I'm going to say better access to the charitable sector - we really struggle to get it in rural and less urban environments. For example, if you're in London and you've got a street struggling with knife crime, there's about 5 different charities just out down the road will come into your school. They'll put resource into your school, they'll work with the kids, they'll take the kids out and do things. **If you're if you're in NE Lincolnshire, rural North Yorkshire, whatever it might be, you've got no chance. So, you have to buy all that. It's equity really, in the access to other support services.**"*

- CEO of a large MAT in the East Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber, several with >40% White British FSM.

04 Roundtable 2 – MAT Leaders

1. White working class identity is cultural as well as economic

'White working class' identity cannot be captured through socioeconomic measures alone. It is a set of cultural values, behaviours and norms, often present even in materially comfortable families, that shape how pupils see education and opportunity. This should not simply be a deficit narrative, which would miss many of the strengths of these communities - such as a deep sense of community, ownership of local education, and a high value ascribed to being a self-starter or hard worker. Many families are multi-generational attendees of the same schools – with parents often sending their children to the same school they went to, even when they didn't have a positive experience there. But while they feel able to criticise the school, they will defend it if someone from outside their community does the same.

[There's an attitude of] "It's ok for us to be really negative about our school, but nobody else is allowed to say that" was kind of the prevailing message, and that deep sense of identity." – CEO of a MAT in the South West, several schools with >20% White British FSM.

"One of the big challenges is how do we break the culture of a lack of value or engagement in education. 'You don't need education; I've made a success of myself on my own.' There is a pride that goes with that." – CEO of a MAT in the East of England, several schools with >30% White British FSM.

Leaders recognised that white working class communities can feel, and have long felt, disenfranchised from mainstream institutions. They noted that this sense of alienation is not unique to white working class groups, and one leader reflected on how disengagement can manifest across multiple public systems when families have historically experienced limited support or connection to state services.

"If we want to know what it's like to feel disenfranchised, look at the riots in 2011 and the Troubled Families scheme." – CEO of a MAT in the North of England, several schools with >40% White British FSM.

White working class pupils don't lack ambition, but they often hold aspirations that differ from the system's expectations, or mask their ambitions due to peer and community perception that academic and professional success are uncool aspirations to hold, and that it's easier not to try than to try and fail. Geography, community makeup and political narratives influence how pupils see themselves and what they believe is possible.

"The problem I've got is that some of the most underperforming kids I've ever worked with belong to white working class families who are economically affluent. There is a cultural identity to being white working class and it's important that those values are reflected in this work because there's strength in what they represent. If there is an ethnic aspect there surely has to be a cultural aspect - so it goes beyond poverty." – CEO of a MAT in London and the South East, several schools with >20% White British FSM.

"It is not cool [in these communities] to say you're doing well." – CEO of a MAT in the Yorkshire and the Humber, several schools with >50% White British FSM.

2. Labelling can unintentionally lower expectations, or enable soft bigotry to be challenged

Leaders questioned whether defining and labelling was a useful exercise, with some feeling that it risks signalling to teachers that expectations should be adjusted downward. Others felt that it was important to assess the ways in which definitions help us to understand the intersecting factors that contribute to pupil and parental attitudes, in order that teachers and leaders can recognise and challenge crude assumptions about aspiration.

[Identifying pupils as having] "SEND is important in that it alters and guides the teacher in what they need, but should Pupil Premium do the same or does it lower expectations or treat these children differently?" – CEO of a MAT operating across England, several schools with >40% White British FSM.

"There's a bit of, I suppose, soft bigotry around, well, these children just don't have any aspirations in there." – CEO of a MAT in the South West, several schools with >20% White British FSM.

What do you see in your schools/colleges as the key factors driving underperformance of white working-class children and young people?

3. Early years and early intervention are decisive

Early childhood, family support thresholds and early identification of need are pivotal, but too many families miss intervention at the most critical stage as high thresholds for support prevent many who could benefit from accessing them. Cuts to early years provision was also seen as contributing to many white working class children starting primary without being "school ready". Many leaders, who taught at various levels, agreed that investment in early years and primary education would see payoff in later years and prevent some issues from being entrenched by KS3, which would in turn provide more capacity for schools to tackle the new issues which arise then for many pupils.

"Early years is hugely important... The thing that both drives underperformance and improves it is the best start in life and early identification and intervention... The threshold for social care

interaction and involvement with families that really could use early intervention is so high that it really is limiting for families. We can see the unravelling of their educational experience happening in Year 2, Year 3, Year 4, where early intervention strategies that we know would work would really be beneficial if those were in place.” – CEO of a MAT in the East of England, several schools with >30% White British FSM.

4. Curriculum breadth, balance and relevance matter

Some participants expressed concern about the narrowing impact of the EBacc, while acknowledging the importance of the core subjects. Vocational pathways should be valued and represented in the curriculum, particularly due to their role in driving attendance.

“The EBacc has done a huge amount of damage. I fundamentally disagree that that's about high aspirations, particularly for white working class students. I mean for 60 years we haven't met the needs of white working class students, but the last 10 have been particularly difficult trying to fit, you know, kind of the wrong people through the wrong the wrong measures.” – CEO of a MAT in London and the South East, several schools with >20% White British FSM.

“Once we had to increase our EBacc percentages those numbers [Progress 8] dropped because we were trying to get students through qualifications that they didn't want to do and their parents didn't value either.” – CEO of a MAT in London and the South East, several schools with >20% White British FSM.

5. Selective education creates structural barriers

Leaders in selective areas felt that academic selection at 11 shaped school intake in a way that disadvantages working class pupils and shapes their perspective on education. They felt that selection explicitly told certain students that academic achievement wasn't for them, only adding to the other factors discussed as affecting white working class students.

“The key issue challenge for us is, is that our students are selected by class aged 11... we can be confident that that selection is based on class because we've got the data to support that and it's something that I've been for many years very passionate about. I call myself, you know, CEO of comprehensive schools, but we can't call ourselves comprehensive because we're not.” – CEO of a MAT in London and the South East, several schools with >20% White British FSM.

6. High-quality teaching is the strongest in-school lever

Excellent teaching is central to improving outcomes for white working class. Defining and codifying good practice within and across schools and trusts was seen to be a key mechanism to ensure this, along with ensuring the best teachers reach the most pupils - but recruitment issues can make this challenging.

“Get the right teachers in front of the right kids” – CEO of a MAT operating across England, several schools with >40% White British FSM.

“Finding good teachers, good leaders is... it’s been a crisis point for 4–5 years in the South East.” – CEO of a MAT in London and the South East, several schools with >20% White British FSM.

7. Representation shouldn’t be underestimated as a lever to increase perceived relevance of education

One leader highlighted the importance of white working class representation within the teaching workforce. He argued that pupils benefit from seeing teachers who reflect their own backgrounds and cultural identities, noting the positive impact that greater representation had played in the London Challenge. In his view, increasing the visibility of white working class teachers could strengthen pupils’ sense of connection to schooling and make academic success feel more attainable.

“If you look at the London challenge, you look at schools in London, especially in some of the most impoverished areas in in big cities, having better representation in the classroom, diverse teaching worked. There is now a vacuum of good quality white working class teachers that they can see reflected back in them.” – CEO of a MAT in the South East, several schools with >30% White British FSM.

8. Schools cannot fix structural disadvantage alone, and all agencies need to be aligned in order to do so

Schools and trusts are key points of stability for families, often having more day-to-day insight into children than other public services. Leaders were clear that the issues affecting white working class pupils stem from systemic failures beyond schools: reduced youth services, limited social care capacity and disconnected ministerial priorities.

“The role of schools is to deliver the best education they can, but they are also sign-posters. Sometimes schools see pupils for longer than their families do. Especially at primary it’s having a holistic view of a child’s development.” – CEO of a MAT in the East of England, several schools with >30% White British FSM.

“I think what we need is some sense of prioritisation in what we’re seeking to tackle and invest in rather than disparate funding streams coming in different areas that are trying to progress different, disconnected strategy and policy agendas. So, if government want to help in this area, then define it and make it a priority cross government, not just the latest fad that’s coming out of a ministerial briefing” – CEO of a MAT in the North of England, several schools with >40% White British FSM.

05 Roundtable 3 – College Leaders

1. Defining 'white working class' is complex in FE settings

Ever6 PP, free college meal eligibility and deprivation metrics miss a significant number of students who fit the behavioural and cultural patterns associated with white working class underperformance.

Many colleges serve overwhelmingly white, economically deprived areas, but working class identity also includes culturally embedded values, intergenerational attitudes to education, and strong place-based identities. Students who do not formally meet disadvantage thresholds still display similar barriers to engagement. This complexity means colleges often rely on patterns of underachievement, rather than demographic labels, to identify the cohort.

"I would say all of our students are working class, and pretty much all white working class as well." – College leader in the North East

"Looking at the Free College meal data is usually a good indicator. And certainly, in the last few months, we've also started to look at the crime deprivation or crime statistics in terms of the schools and where young people are. Because we've seen a marked difference in behaviour and some violent behaviour. So we're trying to triangulate all of that together now. So free college meal data and just looking at the demographics of the post codes and doing an analysis in terms of where young people are coming from and then trying to identify trends and patterns as a result of that." – College leader in the South East

White working class students also frequently present with SEND needs or have other confounding factors such as a disrupted home life - impacting their ability to learn and engage.

"...digital poverty, caring responsibilities, domestic abuse, all of the financial and housing insecurities - and low aspirations that come with all of those characteristics are what you see when you kind of peel back the layers of multiple disadvantage that impact on some of these young people" – College leader in London

"We know that in our organisation... many [students in receipt of free school meals] will be children with EHCPs, but a higher proportion in colleges will be those receiving SEND support without an EHCP for all the reasons that we know about" – College leader in London

2. There is a downstream crisis at KS3, forcing colleges to focus on re-engagement

Across the group, leaders described a consistent pattern of white working class students often arriving disengaged, absent, or under-performing, especially at lower levels. Key Stage 3 was identified as the starting point for this – disengagement is entrenched by Year 10–11, with rising school refusal and elective home education creating a downstream crisis. Colleges described habitual non-attendance among students arriving from school, particularly in areas with historically low attendance at Key Stage 4. They considered attendance both a cause and a symptom of poor educational experience, requiring sustained intervention before academic progress can begin.

Transition is a systemic weak link, with students arriving after years of low attendance, poor experiences of behaviour systems, and unmet needs. “Re-engagement” work therefore dominates Level 1 and Level 2 teaching – but leaders reported that this work is often successful, with attainment gaps narrowing by Level 3 and in destination outcomes.

“We inherit an inequality through transition - and we do know transition is not perfect and hopefully the White Paper recommendations will improve that.” – College leader in the East of England

“The overall attendance in year 11 is in the low 80s... Some of the year 11 attendance of 16 year olds in Bristol is terrible and a lot of those are coming to us, and that’s habit forming.” – College leader in the South West

“But I think what we need to remember is college is a very different environment, and these kids can really thrive in that environment. School is very, very different.” – College leader in the East Midlands

“We are given eight months in a hope to get everyone grade 4 to 9, where someone has not been able to be successful achieving that grade in 16 years. So I think it is just the context and how the colleges offer that support. And you know, when we get these learners, how we really put that whole delivery plan for them over a period of time as part of their study programme so they end up being successful.” – College leader West Midlands

“We are rightly very proud in the FE sector of the work that we do to bridge the gaps for young people when they come to college and we do incredible work and we don’t see the achievement gaps once our students have completed. However, the challenge for me is that those gaps exist in the 1st place. So, when those young people arrive with us at the age of 16, they have a gap to cover before they are able to make the progress of which they are capable. And that is unacceptable from an education system which we are part of, albeit we are part of it at the point where we are making those positive interventions” – College leader in the South West

“Our lower level 1 learners particularly, we do so much on re engagement, getting them committed to attending college rather than really focusing on the curriculum that they’re offering” – College leader in Yorkshire and the Humber

3. But curriculum drives this re-engagement

The practical, vocational, applied curriculum offer was seen as an essential corrective to students' negative experiences of secondary school. Colleges believe they are successful because they:

- place students immediately into purposeful, hands-on learning,
- link learning to clear career pathways, and
- avoid the narrowness associated with EBacc-driven Key Stage 3 - 4 models.

"What then happens at Key Stage 3 and key stage 4 that absolutely turns young people off? And have we gone back to the curriculum and asked if it's engaging enough? Because if you look at your data, so many young people like the practical trades and that's what we do so well and we reengage." – College leader in the West Midlands

Leaders also repeatedly challenged the assumption that "success" should be equated with university, describing FE as offering multiple valid and socially mobile routes via apprenticeships, level 4–5 training and technical careers.

"If you come on a level 1 brick laying course... and you can lay 300 bricks in a day and you can get £300 a day on a building site... and you leave your level one course one third of the way through, is that a failure or is that a success?" – College leader in London

4. Parental engagement shapes post-16 outcomes, but many families lack the confidence, connection or capacity to support learning

College leaders described parental engagement as a decisive factor in how white working class learners arrive at 16. They emphasised that many parents care deeply about their children's success, yet feel disconnected from the education system, lack the knowledge to support learning, or carry negative experiences of school into their relationships with providers. These intergenerational patterns affect attendance, transitions and readiness for post-16 study.

Leaders also highlighted that parental support varies not only in intensity but in *type*: parents may encourage children emotionally, but may not understand the curriculum, lack confidence to help, or feel unable to navigate systems and progression routes. As a result, colleges often inherit learners whose families value success but have limited practical strategies to support it.

This creates a structural gap that colleges feel compelled to fill. Many described undertaking significant, unfunded family-facing work, from home visits and youth work to city-wide parental networks. They view this as essential to re-engagement and progression, but difficult to sustain without stable funding or wider system capacity.

“There is something beyond that, around the support that young people receive at home... We have very good outcomes for young people at primary school in Bristol and far less positive outcomes for young people at secondary, so it is about creating a network of parents... The impact of that support matters - it’s whether they are sitting down and doing the work with their children, but whether they are understanding that work. And I think there’s possibly some difference in that as well. So having an appropriate network to help you to help your child is a positive step forward in that. So that’s what we are trying to create across the city and to do some systems leadership work around our secondaries and with our parental engagement as well.” – College leader in the South West

“The appointment of youth workers... their intervention and engagement with parents and parental engagement, even following the local schools model of home visits around attendance, has been absolutely critical.” – College leader in the East Midlands

5. Gendered differences present themselves clearly in FE

While many public debates focus on males, leaders reported that white working class females have the largest post-16 attainment gaps in their colleges. This trend appears across retention, achievement and progression data. A few speculated about cultural norms, confidence, economic inactivity among women, and low expectations as contributing factors.

“We measure that group [white working class students] in terms of retention, pass rates, overall achievement. We measure the different GCSE outcomes for an above standard pass, and A level provision and a whole raft of others that sit underneath that and in every single category white working class, particularly females [underperform]... the difference for us in terms of males and the comparator group is minimal. The difference between white working class females and the comparator female group is significant on all measures.” – College leader in the East Midlands

“Our results for working class males are very, very good. So, I think colleges have resourced better the support for white working males post 16 and I think they leave, perhaps with a slightly different perspective than they did when they were at school.” – College leader in the East Midlands

6. SEND is a compounding factor to challenges, and structural inequalities in access to support deepen the disadvantage gap

Colleges reported high levels of SEND among incoming students, and that they frequently did not have EHCPs. They stressed structural unfairness:

- middle class students secure EHCPs more easily
- working class students present high need but low documentation
- mental health demand is rising sharply
- and support thresholds in school and social care settings are too high, driving needs downstream into FE

"What we definitely have is inverse proportionality. So in [one catchment area] we have far higher levels of deprivation according to the DfE Post code data, which is based on the indices of multiple deprivation and lower numbers of education, health and care plans. In [another catchment area], where we've got far higher wealth, we have far higher levels of education, health and care plans, so it's completely inversely proportionate, which is unsurprising, but is unfair." – College leader in the South West

"A lot of people have talked about EHCPs, but it's not just about EHCPs, it's about ALS, also. 25% of my students have an EHCP, but another 50% of also that got ALS support. What you see and some of that data on this is absolutely consistent with what we find, which is that double disadvantage of the two intersecting axes of inequality of disability and poverty." – College leader in London

7. Colleges saw themselves as key in providing relevant IAG to this group

Several leaders argued that poor IAG in secondary schools contributes to disengagement and low aspiration among white working class young people. Colleges see themselves as rebuilding this guidance from scratch – helping students understand pathways, earnings, qualifications, and opportunities they had not been exposed to previously.

"The careers advice and guidance given in school is not good enough, so they're not ambitious. Some of these young people are not ambitious. They don't know where to go. They don't know what careers they can get. They don't know how much they're going to learn. You know, all of those types of things. And it's something that we do really well. And I think that's why from FE these young people progress into fantastic jobs or onto apprenticeships in all manner of things. They do incredibly well, but it's because we give them that advice and guidance the whole way through the whole time that they're with us. I think that that has a big impact." – College leader in the East Midlands

"We can pretty much guarantee to every student, we will get you in front of employees, so we do apprenticeship week, or in February we'll have an event with about 80 employees will come and that's packed out with young people and their mums and dads and parents and carers who want to see what opportunities there are. So I think that's what FE does compared to school." – College leader in the South West

8. Colleges have far more flexibility in the pastoral and wraparound support that they provide

Colleges can adjust entry levels, tailor curriculum pace and pathways, build personalised pastoral plans, and scaffold students' "learner journey" far more responsively than schools. This was presented as a core reason why FE often closes gaps that were entrenched pre-16.

Every college described extensive, resource-intensive support structures: behaviour teams, mentors, youth workers, counsellors, attendance officers, welfare grants, free breakfasts, and

alternative spaces for students to stabilise before re-entering learning. This wraparound model was presented as essential to narrowing gaps - but chronically under-funded, relying on internal budgets or discontinued programmes (e.g. catch-up funding).

"[Colleges have] a little bit more flexibility than schools around what we do to support these learners, and I think we would all be able to give lots of examples, you know, certainly for us it ranges from free breakfast to get them into college in the beginning, it's that wrap around support on the studies, it's that building resilience and that personal development – so not just raising aspirations and self belief, but actually looking at how we can build that resilience as well to keep them on programme. And I think we then have lots of examples of where we work with other agencies, projects that we run to make sure that not only that we've got the right support mechanisms in college but we do a lot more to keep them on programme and ultimately achieve." – College leader in Yorkshire and the Humber

"We have a behaviour support team comprised of six staff members, we have another 4 mentors. On top of that team, we have attendance coordinator in every broader curriculum area. Because of the CAMHS list, we have our own counsellor who works three days a week on a permanent basis, and on top we have a specialised pastoral team which delivers the tutorials to 16 to 18s - and this is just to kind of give you an insight into the resource – and that is on top of the free breakfast that most of us do, and so on." - College leader in the West Midlands

"We offer a whole host of things – I could reel off a number of things we do. We don't have an issue really with difference between white working class at my college and other groups. But it is because we do so much. We have a room for people to catch up and we have great parental contact. We've got all the sports, services, everything that every everybody has mentioned." – College leader in the East Midlands

9. Funding instability and policy discontinuity must cease being barriers to sustained success

College leaders expressed frustration that effective interventions including youth work, EMA-style financial support, technical pathways, and early vocational apprenticeships are repeatedly lost when government priorities shift. They argued that FE succeeds with white working class students *despite* funding instability, not because the system is aligned around long-term strategy.

"When the new government comes in with a new initiative, all the great work that we've done stops getting funded and we have to fund it ourselves and we haven't the money to do that... Young apprenticeship about five or six ten years ago, it was unbelievable... It was ultra well funded. It was an absolute success. When the government left and the new government came in, because it wasn't their idea... the great things that are going on stop." – College leader in the South West

"We have had no option but to appoint a significant group now of youth workers and their intervention and engagement with parents and parental engagement... has been absolutely critical within this, but again it's an area of work we're not funded for." – College leader in the East Midlands

"Some of the stuff that was in place that really helped this group like the catch up one to one tuition around English and maths was really, really valuable for our cohort. And of course that funding went." – College leader in the East Midlands