

Press Release

Disadvantaged pupils perform better in London due to earlier improvements in primary schools

Disadvantaged pupils have higher academic attainment in London than in other regions in England and have pulled even further ahead over the past decade, particularly in inner London. This has often been referred to as the 'London effect'. In new IFS research published today, we show that this higher level and improvement in performance is unlikely to have been driven by improvements in secondary schools. Instead, we argue that the roots of the London effect lie much earlier, with rapid improvements in pupil performance in London's primary schools in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

These are amongst the findings a new report "*Lessons from London schools for attainment gaps and social mobility*" written by Ellen Greaves, Lindsey Macmillan and Luke Sibieta. This was commissioned by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty (SMCP) Commission, with support from the ESRC through the Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy at IFS.

Following on from rapid improvements over the previous decade, disadvantaged pupils in London currently achieve substantially better exam results than those elsewhere in England:

- In inner London in 2012, 54% of pupils eligible for free schools meals (FSM) achieved 5 or more GCSEs (or their equivalent) at A*-C (including English and Maths), compared with 47% in outer London, 40% in the West Midlands and 30-35% in other regions outside of London.
- Disadvantaged pupils in inner London are also substantially more likely to achieve high results, with 13% of pupils eligible for FSM achieving 8 or more A*-Bs (including English and Maths), compared with 3-6% in regions outside of London.
- This higher level of attainment is then translated into higher levels of participation in post-compulsory education.

To date, many commentators have argued that the roots of London's success and improvements at GCSE lie in a range of policies and initiatives targeted at London over the past decade, such as the London Challenge. In fact it looks like London's better and improved performance reflects two key factors: differences in the mix of pupils attending London's schools compared with other areas of the country; and, improvements in the results achieved by pupils in London when they were in primary school.

The mix of pupils in Inner London and other large cities differs from that in the rest of England, with a greater number of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds. Part of the better and improving results can be accounted for by these differences. However, most of the higher level and improved performance of disadvantaged pupils in London can be explained by past achievements in primary schools. For example:

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- In 2012, pupils eligible for FSM in inner London were 21 percentage points more likely to achieve 5 or more GCSEs (or their equivalent) at A*-C (including English and Maths).
- This falls to 17 percentage points after accounting for pupil characteristics and demographics.
- After accounting for prior attainment, this then falls even further to 6 percentage points.

London' secondary schools do still perform better than those elsewhere in the country after accounting for prior attainment and pupil demographics, but the majority of the higher level of performance can be accounted for by pupils entering secondary schools with higher levels of achievement.

At age 11 disadvantaged pupils in London, particularly Inner London, perform significantly better at Key Stage 2 in both English and maths than in other areas of England.

- There was a big improvement in Key Stage 2 English scores for disadvantaged pupils in London between 1999 and 2003. This is a key reason why Key Stage 4 results in London subsequently improved between 2004 and 2008.
- Key Stage 2 Maths results have remained consistently higher for London compared with the rest of the country.

Disadvantaged pupils in Manchester and Birmingham also have higher levels of attainment in secondary school and have seen substantial improvements over time relative to the rest of England. As in London, this is largely explained by higher attainment of pupils in these areas in primary schools. Higher levels of GCSE results in Manchester and Birmingham do not translate into higher levels of post-compulsory education, however, in contrast to London.

“The higher level and improved performance of disadvantaged pupils in secondary schools in London over the past decade is a remarkable success story. Our work suggests that specific policies focussed on London secondary schools, such as the London Challenge, may not be the main reason for this improvement. Instead, it appears to derive largely from improved performance in primary schools. Success at primary schools is clearly crucial.”

says Luke Sibieta, Programme Director at IFS and an author of the report.

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Notes to Editors:

1. For embargoed copies of the report or other queries, contact the IFS press office: 020 7291 4818 / 07780 667013, bonnie_b@ifs.org.uk;
2. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty (SMCP) Commission monitors the progress of government and others in improving social mobility and reducing child poverty in the United Kingdom. Chaired by the Rt Hon Alan Milburn, it is an advisory non-departmental public body of the Department for Education, the Department for Work & Pensions and the Cabinet Office. The Commission was established with a remit to:
 - publish an annual report setting out progress made in improving social mobility and reducing child poverty in Great Britain;

- provide published advice to ministers at their request on social mobility and child poverty; and
- act as an advocate for social mobility beyond government by challenging employers, the professions and universities amongst others to play their part in improving life chances.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/social-mobility-and-child-poverty-commission>

3. The Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy (CPP) at IFS is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). ESRC funds research into the big social and economic questions facing us today. It also develops and trains the UK's future social scientists. Its research informs public policies and helps make businesses, voluntary bodies and other organisations more effective. Most importantly, it makes a real difference to all our lives. The ESRC is an independent organisation, established by Royal Charter in 1965, and funded mainly by the Government. <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/>

