# White working-class pupils lag in 3,000 schools with bright spots in just 21



Concerns are growing over the educational achievements of white working-class pupils in England, with recent data revealing that they are falling behind their peers in over 3,000 secondary schools. Official statistics indicate that only 21 out of more than 3,400 schools report performance levels among white working-class children that come close to the national average. This dramatic disparity is highlighted by the fact that just 18.6% of white working-class pupils achieve grades 5 or above in English and maths GCSE, significantly lower than the 45.9% national benchmark.

Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson has voiced alarm over what she describes as a 'betrayal' of these children, signalling an urgent need to address their underperformance across various metrics, including academic attainment, behaviour, and life chances. Her comments come in response to ongoing challenges from the Reform UK party, led by Nigel Farage, and signify a governmental recognition of a demographic that has historically been overlooked by policy makers. Ms Phillipson stated, “Put simply, these children have been betrayed – left behind in society’s rear-view mirror.”

Critics, however, assert that the Labour government’s recent initiatives are politically motivated, aiming to counteract rising support for Reform UK's narrative on educational disadvantage. Tory education spokesman Neil O’Brien has dismissed Phillipson's efforts as 'disastrous', accusing her of dismantling long-standing reforms introduced over the past three decades, reforms designed to elevate educational standards. He pointed to cuts in support for academically gifted students in subjects such as maths and sciences, arguing that these changes fail to address the underlying issues of educational inequality.

Statistically, the divide in attainment continues to widen, with white British pupils eligible for free school meals performing, on average, a grade and a half lower than their wealthier counterparts across all GCSE subjects. The reasons cited for this performance gap are multifaceted, including a concerning lack of parental involvement and aspirations. Research indicates that white boys from disadvantaged backgrounds often report the lowest aspirations of all demographic groups, and this trend extends beyond boys, with white working-class girls also showing significant declines in academic performance over the past five years.

An inquiry, led by Sir Hamid Patel, who oversees several successful schools in northern England, will probe deeper into the factors contributing to this educational failure. Alongside him, notable figures such as former Home Secretary Sir David Blunkett and school standards tsar Sir Kevan Collins are expected to provide valuable insights. This investigation will explore the drivers behind white working-class pupils' struggles, examining how issues related to behaviour, attendance, mental health, and educational engagement affect their overall prospects.

Moreover, historical data reveals a consistent trend over decades, with reports indicating that white working-class pupils have been systematically neglected within the education system. For instance, only 32% of disadvantaged white British children achieved five good GCSEs, compared to 42% of black Caribbean children and a striking 61% of disadvantaged Indian children.

It is evident that the challenges facing white working-class pupils stem from a range of socio-economic factors, including the 'double disadvantage' of low family income and geographical poverty, particularly in rural areas. Research indicates that these boys are significantly less likely to pursue A-levels or higher education than their peers from more privileged backgrounds, often due to systemic barriers entrenched in their local contexts.

As policymakers move to address these pressing issues, the emphasis must shift toward creating tailored strategies that consider the unique challenges faced by white working-class pupils. The inquiry aims not only to highlight successful practices in the minority of schools that excel in supporting these students but also to broaden the conversation around educational reform, addressing the persistent inequalities that have characterised their educational journeys for far too long.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14768293/White-working-class-pupils-secondary-schools.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://www.parliament.uk/external/committees/committee-news-pre-oct-2020/2014/june/white-working-class-report/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14768293/White-working-class-pupils-secondary-schools.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/493bf847-c5ce-4d2c-aed9-27fd58371e52), [[5]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/06/22/white-working-class-pupils-neglected-education-system-decades/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/white-working-class-boys-from-poor-neighbourhoods-unlikely-to-do-a-levels/), [[6]](https://ukparliament.shorthandstories.com/disadvantaged-white-working-class-pupils-/index.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14768293/White-working-class-pupils-secondary-schools.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://ukparliament.shorthandstories.com/disadvantaged-white-working-class-pupils-/index.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/493bf847-c5ce-4d2c-aed9-27fd58371e52), [[5]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/06/22/white-working-class-pupils-neglected-education-system-decades/)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14768293/White-working-class-pupils-secondary-schools.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/493bf847-c5ce-4d2c-aed9-27fd58371e52> - A letter to the Financial Times critiques the oversimplified narrative of gender disparities in educational achievement, highlighting that white working-class boys perform the worst educationally among different demographic groups. The author references a 2021 education committee report indicating that these boys have been neglected by all major political parties for decades, resulting in persistent underachievement and limited employment opportunities within their communities. The letter suggests that this neglect is likely to continue in the future.
3. <https://www.parliament.uk/external/committees/committee-news-pre-oct-2020/2014/june/white-working-class-report/> - A UK Parliament report reveals that only 32% of poor white British children achieve five good GCSEs, compared to 42% of black Caribbean children and 61% of disadvantaged Indian children. The report also highlights that the attainment gap between white British children eligible for free school meals and their better-off peers has barely changed over the last seven years, and this gap is larger for white British children than in any other ethnic group.
4. <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/white-working-class-boys-from-poor-neighbourhoods-unlikely-to-do-a-levels/> - Research by the Sutton Trust indicates that white working-class boys from poor neighbourhoods face a 'double disadvantage' of low family income and place poverty, significantly reducing their likelihood of academic study after GCSEs. The study found that only 29% of this group will continue to take AS, A levels or another qualification after GCSE, compared with around half (46%) of white working-class boys living in more affluent areas and two-thirds (68%) of boys from more advantaged families.
5. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/06/22/white-working-class-pupils-neglected-education-system-decades/> - A report by MPs reveals that white working-class pupils have been neglected by the education system for decades. In 2018/19, just 53% of white British pupils on free school meals met the expected standard of development at the end of the early years foundation stage, one of the lowest percentages for any disadvantaged ethnic group. In 2019, only 17.7% of the poorest white British pupils achieved Grade 5 or above in English and maths, compared to 22.5% of their peers who are in the same income bracket.
6. <https://ukparliament.shorthandstories.com/disadvantaged-white-working-class-pupils-/index.html> - An inquiry by the UK Parliament explores the factors contributing to the disadvantage of white working-class pupils, including persistent and multigenerational disadvantage, place-based factors, family experience of education, lack of social capital, disengagement from the curriculum, and low participation in higher education. The inquiry calls for a better understanding of these factors to address the attainment gap and recommends developing data sets that allow analysis of ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status at local levels.
7. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/45962/html/> - Evidence presented to the UK Parliament's Education Committee highlights that white British boys from poor families are less likely to have basic reading skills than their more advantaged peers. In 2012, 51% of white British boys eligible for free school meals made the expected progress in reading, writing, and maths, compared to a national average of 74%. This attainment gap widens from 24% to 32% by the time white boys from poor families complete secondary education.