# London’s lead masks widening post‑Covid gaps as ministers lack a clear delivery plan



London’s schools remain a study in contrasts: pupils in the capital continue to outperform those elsewhere in England, yet a leading think tank has warned that there is no clear, cross‑government plan to close the widening gaps that have opened up since the Covid pandemic. According to the Institute for Government, educational inequalities have “grown wider and more pronounced” and ministers have “not yet articulated a clear vision or plan” for delivering their stated ambition to narrow disadvantage.  
(Reporting and analysis informed by the IfG’s findings and commentary in The Independent.)

National attainment figures mask stark local variation. Department for Education statistics show that, at Key Stage 4, the headline measure of pupils achieving a strong pass in English and maths stands at roughly two‑thirds of students across the country, while Key Stage 2 results put London’s combined reading, writing and maths attainment at about 69 per cent — roughly eight points above the 61 per cent national average. The DfE’s datasets and the IfG’s analysis both highlight that average attainment at primary level has slipped since 2019, driven especially by falls in maths and writing.  
(Compiled from Department for Education releases on Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 2 and the IfG report.)

The local picture is extreme. Some local authorities record attainment rates barely half those of the highest‑performing areas: examples cited by analysts include places where fewer than two in five pupils meet the KS4 English and maths standard, while affluent west London boroughs report rates in the eighties. The result is a widening gap between London and many other regions since the pandemic, and a growing gulf in outcomes between disadvantaged pupils and their better‑off peers in much of the country.  
(Data points and regional contrasts drawn from the DfE performance releases and the IfG/Independent reporting.)

The IfG and other commentators point to several structural drivers. London’s relatively small disadvantage gap is attributed in part to its demographic mix and the capital’s ability to attract experienced, well‑qualified teachers; outside the capital, teacher shortages and resource constraints have made it harder for schools to recover lost ground. The Education Policy Institute’s work on local disadvantage gaps reaches similar conclusions, highlighting teacher supply, funding disparities and pupil absence as recurring factors behind local declines.  
(Analysis referenced to the IfG, the Education Policy Institute and the Independent’s coverage.)

Pupil absence has emerged as a particular concern. Department for Education absence statistics show a rise in severe absence — pupils missing half or more of sessions — to levels approaching the low hundreds of thousands during the 2023/24 autumn term, a trend the IfG said will be “key” to narrowing inequalities. Charities and sector bodies warn this has real consequences beyond test scores: Teach First’s research and press statements point to long‑term destination gaps, with disadvantaged young people far more likely to be out of sustained education, employment or training several years after GCSEs. James Toop, head of Teach First, told The Independent the pandemic “set back a generation, with disadvantaged young people paying the highest price.”  
(Drawn from DfE absence data, Teach First analysis and quotes reported in The Independent.)

Ministers say they are taking action but critics argue it is not yet sufficient or well targeted. The government points to measures such as the expert‑led Curriculum and Assessment Review, new regional improvement (Rise) teams, strengthened accountability and a promised schools white paper as steps to raise standards. It has also announced an expansion of free school meal eligibility — to cover all children in households on Universal Credit from the 2026 school year — which ministers say will support nutrition and help low‑income families. The Department for Education emphasises these policies while acknowledging more work is needed.  
(Statements and policy measures referenced to the Department for Education press announcements and the DfE response reported in The Independent.)

Opposition politicians and sector figures say those commitments will not close the unfair local gaps unless funding and workforce incentives are rebalanced. Caroline Voaden, the Liberal Democrat MP on the Commons education select committee, told The Independent that funding for pupils with additional needs varies dramatically between places — “a Camden school is paid nearly three times as much as a school in Devon for every child with additional needs on their roll” — and argued that unequal funding, staffing and facilities help explain why children outside London are being left behind. The IfG calls for a clearer delivery plan that focuses on spreading what works, reducing absence and targeting support where the gaps are widest.  
(Attribution and critique drawn from The Independent’s reporting, the IfG recommendations and EPI/sector commentary.)

The policy choices ahead are stark. Independent analysis and sector groups urge urgent action to recruit and incentivise high‑quality teachers into hard‑to‑staff areas, to restore the real‑terms value of pupil premium funding and to design interventions that reduce severe absence and support disadvantaged families. Without a detailed, resourced plan that links national ambition to local delivery, the risk is that the post‑pandemic divergence in opportunity becomes entrenched — consigning another cohort of children to lower attainment and poorer long‑term prospects.  
(Synthesis informed by the IfG report, EPI findings, Teach First data and Department for Education policy announcements.)

### 📌 Reference Map:

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/schools-teachers-gcse-results-london-covid-b2810344.html), [[5]](https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/local-disadvantage-gaps-in-england/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2023-24), [[3]](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment/2023-24), [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/schools-teachers-gcse-results-london-covid-b2810344.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2023-24), [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/schools-teachers-gcse-results-london-covid-b2810344.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/schools-teachers-gcse-results-london-covid-b2810344.html), [[5]](https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/local-disadvantage-gaps-in-england/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[4]](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2023-24-autumn-term), [[6]](https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/press-release/third-disadvantaged-pupils-out-sustained-work-or-education-after-leaving-school), [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/schools-teachers-gcse-results-london-covid-b2810344.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/over-half-a-million-more-children-to-get-free-school-meals), [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/schools-teachers-gcse-results-london-covid-b2810344.html)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/schools-teachers-gcse-results-london-covid-b2810344.html), [[5]](https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/local-disadvantage-gaps-in-england/), [[6]](https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/press-release/third-disadvantaged-pupils-out-sustained-work-or-education-after-leaving-school)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/schools-teachers-gcse-results-london-covid-b2810344.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2023-24> - This Department for Education statistical release presents Key Stage 4 (KS4) performance in England for the 2023–24 academic year. It summarises GCSE and equivalent outcomes at national, regional and local authority level, including measures such as Progress 8, Attainment 8 and the percentage achieving grades 5 or above in English and maths. The release explains methodological changes since 2019, provides downloadable data files and interactive tables, and highlights trends by pupil characteristics including disadvantage, ethnicity, special educational needs and prior attainment. Revised figures reflect late results and school checking exercises, and the publication is designated as accredited official statistics. Nationwide.
3. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment/2023-24> - The Department for Education’s Key Stage 2 attainment release reports primary school outcomes for 2023–24. It states that 61% of pupils met the expected standard in reading, writing and maths combined, down from 65% in 2019, and provides subject-level figures showing declines in writing and maths compared with pre-pandemic years. The publication disaggregates results by region and local authority, noting London achieved the highest combined attainment at 69% in 2024, several percentage points above other regions. The release includes methodological notes, downloadable tables and commentary on year-on-year changes and comparability with previous assessments. It supports analysis of local variation nationwide.
4. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2023-24-autumn-term> - This Department for Education statistical release on pupil absence for the autumn term 2023/24 details levels of overall, persistent and severe absence in England. It defines persistent absence as missing ten per cent or more of sessions and severe absence as missing fifty per cent or more. The publication reports rising rates of severe absence, with around 142,000 pupil enrolments classified as severely absent in Autumn 2023/24, and provides breakdowns by school type and reason for absence. Accompanying data files and methodology notes allow users to examine trends over time and variations by pupil characteristics and geography and international comparisons.
5. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/local-disadvantage-gaps-in-england/> - The Education Policy Institute’s report 'Local Disadvantage Gaps in England' examines how the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers varies across regions and local authorities. Using recent assessment data, the study finds London consistently has the smallest disadvantage gaps across primary, secondary and post‑16 phases, while areas in the North and South West display larger gaps. The report maps local authority trajectories, highlights where disadvantaged pupils are falling further behind since 2019, and identifies factors such as teacher shortages, funding disparities and pupil absence. It concludes with policy recommendations to target early intervention and support through secondary schooling.
6. <https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/press-release/third-disadvantaged-pupils-out-sustained-work-or-education-after-leaving-school> - Teach First’s press release highlights long‑term destination gaps for disadvantaged pupils, drawing on Department for Education destination data. It reports that 31% of disadvantaged pupils were not in sustained education, employment or training five years after completing GCSEs, compared with 13% of their more affluent peers. The charity warns the pandemic and teacher shortages have worsened prospects for disadvantaged young people and calls for government action to recruit and retain excellent teachers, restore pupil premium value and provide targeted support. Teach First urges urgent policy attention to close the attainment and destination gaps that entrench social inequality across England's schools.
7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/over-half-a-million-more-children-to-get-free-school-meals> - This Department for Education press release announces an expansion of free school meal eligibility to all children in households receiving Universal Credit, from the 2026 school year. The government says the change will benefit over half a million extra children, put roughly £500 back into parents’ pockets annually and lift 100,000 children out of poverty in the long run. The release outlines aims to improve child nutrition and educational outcomes, references supporting measures such as free breakfast clubs and updated school food standards, and quotes senior ministers and external organisations welcoming the policy while noting longer-term costs and implementation details.