

# Early learning and childcare delivering for disadvantaged children in England<sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Full report PDF<sup>[2]</sup>

## Executive summary

There is a large and stubborn gap in outcomes between disadvantaged children and their peers by age 5 in England. This is in spite of substantial early years investment over 15 years and clear evidence that regular, high-quality early learning can transform life chances. This paper reviews the impact of policies to date, considers the outlook for disadvantaged children and the threat to their provision from the new 30-hour entitlement and proposes a new future direction.

**Policy background:** The government has pursued a mixed-market approach to the delivery of early learning and childcare. A consequence of that policy has been particularly pronounced disparities in provider quality. The policy-makers have sought to reduce these disparities primarily through a) continuing the tradition of targeting school-based provision at disadvantaged children and b) applying the rigour of the school system across the mixed market through building professional capacity and regulation – sometimes termed ‘schoolification’.

**Impact on disadvantaged children:** The approach to date has been partially successful for disadvantaged children. A relatively large proportion of disadvantaged children attend school nursery classes and maintained nursery schools, where they benefit from a range of strengths that are intrinsic to schools, such as communities of high-skilled learning professionals and the ability to manage a seamless transition into Reception. ‘Schoolification’ policies have also helped raise qualifications and standards across all types of providers. Outcomes of disadvantaged 5-year-olds have thus risen overall, keeping pace with improvements across the wider population.

Disadvantaged children, however, remain 18 percentage points less likely to achieve a ‘good level of development’ at age 5 than their peers. The gap has only narrowed by 3 percentage points from 2007 to 2015. On this measure, disadvantaged children also remain disproportionately represented in poorer-quality settings and more likely not to take up any early years provision.

**Experiences of disadvantaged families:** The options for disadvantaged families are broadly polarised between good quality school-based settings and weaker private and voluntary providers. Good school-based provision is not accessible for many living in areas where free entitlement places are limited, and is unlikely to be a feasible option for low-income working families who require flexible hours or those with children aged two or younger. Expensive and/or weak providers dominate private and voluntary market alternatives for families in disadvantaged areas. Structural and financial factors limit the possibilities for such settings to embed quality deeply, as schools or strong nursery chains might. Low take-up amongst disadvantaged families is partially a reflection of their limited options.

**The outlook for disadvantaged children:** The current direction of early learning and childcare policy suggests a future decline in the prospects of disadvantaged children. The new 30-hour entitlement for working families poses a risk that children from the poorest families will be squeezed out of the settings where they thrive most as schools convert part-time nursery class places to a much smaller number of full-time places, for which disadvantaged children will not qualify. The viability of private settings serving deprived communities will also be disproportionately affected by the reduced opportunity to cross-subsidise local authority rates with parent fees, as their margins are tighter. In parallel, the decline of Children’s Centres is likely to continue as budget cuts undermine leadership and outreach. Maintained nursery schools could face a similar fortune.

**A new path forward:** Decisive action is needed so that early years investment fulfils its potential as a powerful vehicle for equalising life chances. Policy makers must respond fully to the economic challenges faced by settings serving disadvantaged communities, and should build on the benefits that schools already bring to many disadvantaged children. The aim should be to create a stronger and more school-led and linked system in deprived communities.

We propose four areas for change:

- i. Provide more targeted investment in all providers serving disadvantaged children
- ii. Encourage schools in disadvantaged areas to form deep partnerships with outside providers to help drive quality

iii. Encourage and empower schools to maintain and extend the reach of their nursery classes

iv. Support strong schools and academy sponsors to deliver provision beyond the school gate, by setting up new social enterprises and providing leadership to Children's Centres and nursery schools that need support

This paper puts forward thirteen recommendations under these headings.

**Region:** Europe <sup>[3]</sup>

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