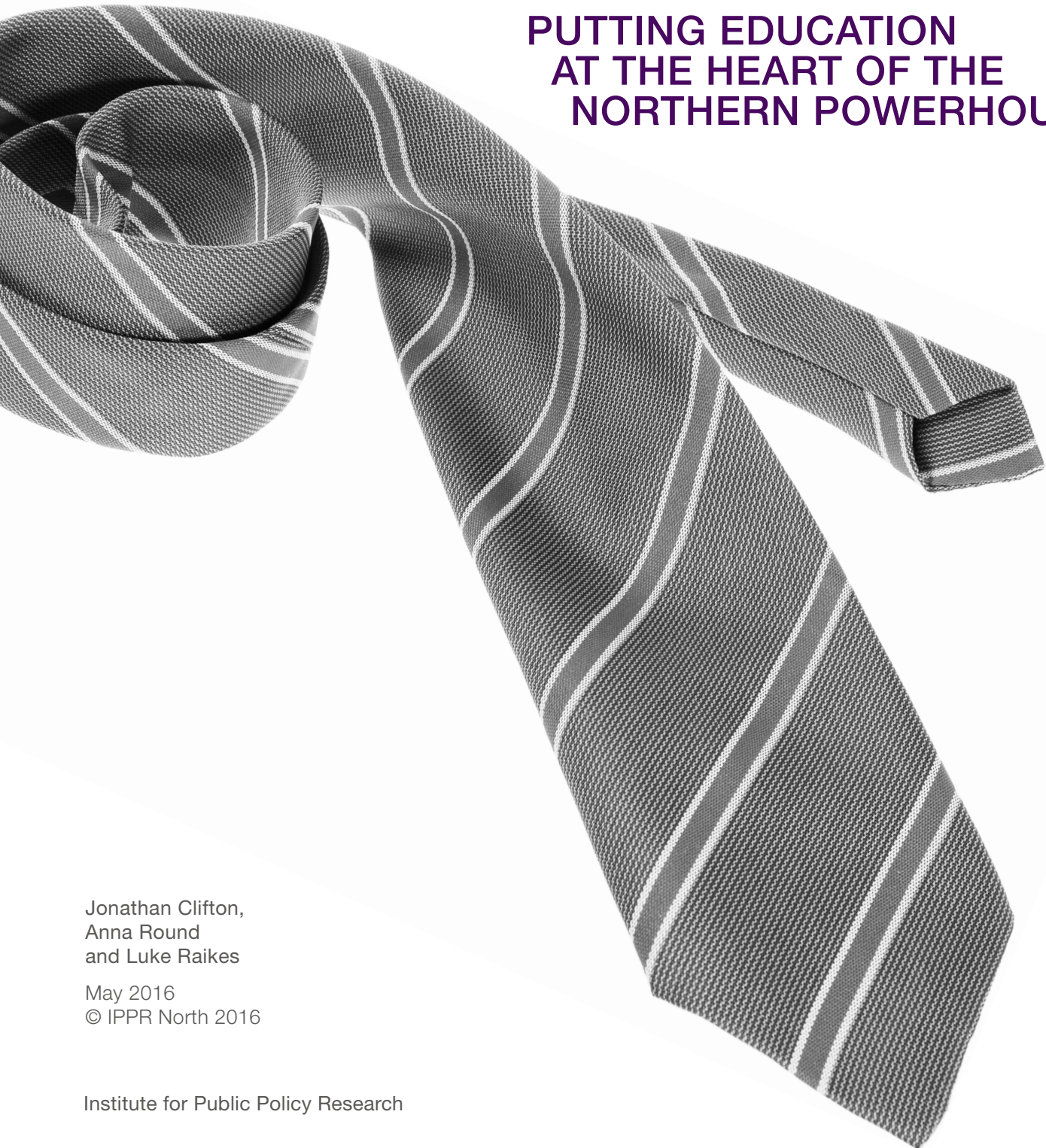


REPORT

# NORTHERN SCHOOLS

**PUTTING EDUCATION  
AT THE HEART OF THE  
NORTHERN POWERHOUSE**



Jonathan Clifton,  
Anna Round  
and Luke Raikes

May 2016  
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IPPR North is IPPR's dedicated thinktank for the North of England. With its head office in Manchester and representatives in Newcastle, IPPR North's research, together with our stimulating and varied events programme, seeks to produce innovative policy ideas for fair, democratic and sustainable communities across the North of England.

IPPR's purpose is to conduct and promote research into, and the education of the public in, the economic, social and political sciences, science and technology, the voluntary sector and social enterprise, public services, and industry and commerce.

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# CONTENTS

Summary .....	1
Foreword: Brett Wigdortz OBE.....	6
<b>1. Introduction: the challenges facing the northern powerhouse project .....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 The state of the North .....	7
1.2 Identifying clear objectives for the northern powerhouse .....	8
1.3 Creating a focus on skills and schools in the North.....	9
1.4 Our research and the structure of this report .....	10
<b>2. Why education should be at the heart of the northern powerhouse .....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 Skills and qualifications will be crucial to employment and progression in work .....	12
2.2 Education brings a range of social benefits .....	13
2.3 Competing with London.....	13
<b>3. The challenges and opportunities facing education in the North ....</b>	<b>15</b>
3.1 Early years: educational inequalities start before children start primary school .....	15
3.2 Primary schools: average attainment across the North obscures highly variable performance from school to school.....	20
3.3 Secondary schools: results in the North are poorer, but context is crucial .....	23
3.4 Funding, staffing, and resources: ensuring inputs to the education system support the outcomes .....	31
<b>4. Rising to the challenge.....</b>	<b>39</b>
4.1 Northern success: schools which perform well .....	39
4.2 Four case studies of school success and improvement .....	41
4.3 Conclusions .....	46
References .....	48

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# SUMMARY

There is growing recognition that improving schools is a crucial component of efforts to create a ‘northern powerhouse’. Our analysis of education data reveals why northern schools are falling behind those in London:

- The divide between London and the north of England starts before children reach school age. The ‘early years gap’ between children from poorer and wealthier homes is almost twice as large in the North as it is in London.
- The North performs reasonably well on primary school attainment. Places like Redcar and Cleveland, Trafford and Warrington all have results that would be the envy of most London boroughs.
- Secondary school attainment in some parts of the North is a big cause for concern, and is the stage where educational inequalities widen sharply.
- Focusing on failing schools is important but will not be sufficient to eradicate educational inequality. Even good and outstanding schools have attainment gaps.
- Educational inequality is not just a problem for satellite and coastal towns: some major northern cities such as Liverpool, Leeds and Sheffield also struggle to raise attainment among disadvantaged pupils.
- Inputs matter: schools in the North receive significantly less money per pupil than those in London, and can struggle to attract and retain high-quality teachers and leaders.

The North has the potential to build on its burgeoning economic strengths, generating prosperity that will benefit the whole of the country. Addressing educational disadvantage must be at the heart of this transformation.



There has been a concerted effort to renew the economy in the north of England,<sup>1</sup> as part of the chancellor’s ‘northern powerhouse’ agenda. And there is a growing recognition that education and skills need to be at the heart of this project. As Sir Michael Wilshaw argued recently: ‘the northern powerhouse will splutter and die if their youngsters lack the skills to sustain it’.

Given the importance of education for building a stronger economy and society, educational outcomes in the North are a cause for concern. In simple terms, there is a gap in attainment between the north of England and the ‘southern powerhouse’ that is London – whose schools are a

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report we use the north of England (or ‘the North’) to refer to the ONS regions of North West, North East and Yorkshire and the Humber.

success story. This is particularly acute when looking at measures of educational inequality. If the north of England is to maximise its potential, it must improve its educational performance, especially for those children from poorer families. London's success was not an accident – results for disadvantaged pupils there have increased dramatically over the last decade. With investment, collaboration and strong leadership, London has shown that success is possible.

Statistics for the whole of the North, however, obscure important differences about school performance. Our analysis of education data reveals a more complicated story about why northern schools are falling behind and the role that policy should play in addressing this issue.

### **KEY LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS**

#### **1. The divide between London and the North starts before children reach school age**

In London, 59 per cent of children who are eligible for free school meals achieve a 'good level of development' when they complete reception class at age five. Meanwhile in the north of England only 49 per cent of similar pupils do so. What's more, the 'early years gap' between children from poorer and wealthier homes is almost twice as large in the North as it is in London. Given the strong correlation between early education and outcomes later in life, any efforts to tackle educational inequality in the North must start before children have reached school age.

#### **2. The North performs reasonably well on primary school attainment, and high-performing local authorities are a source of expertise in the system**

At the end of primary school, 80 per cent of pupils in the North achieve level 4 or above in reading, mathematics and writing – the same proportion as across England. What's more, the performance of disadvantaged pupils is higher in the North East and North West than it is in the rest of the country, with 67 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals achieving level 4 or above, compared to a national average of 66 per cent. At a local authority level, around half of the North's local authorities outperform the national average. Redcar and Cleveland, Trafford and Warrington all have results that would be the envy of most London boroughs. It is important that the expertise of these local authorities is not lost as more schools become academies.

#### **3. Secondary school attainment is a big cause for concern, and should be the policy focus**

Secondary school attainment in the north of England lags behind that in London. This is also the stage where educational inequalities widen sharply. Outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in northern local authorities are rarely above the national average of 36.7 per cent, and less than 3 per cent of schools in the North have managed to eradicate the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their wealthier peers. School improvement policies and activities in the North should be focused towards the secondary stage.



#### **4. Focusing on failing schools is not enough – even good and outstanding schools have attainment gaps**

Tackling failing schools is a necessary but not sufficient measure to address educational inequality: even schools which are performing well still exhibit attainment gaps between wealthier and poorer pupils. In northern schools that are rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted there is a gap of 22 percentage points between pupils on free school meals and their better-off peers. This suggests that policymakers should focus on tackling the variation in performance that occurs *within* each school, for example by ensuring that schools spend their pupil premium resources effectively.

#### **5. Educational inequality is not just a problem for satellite and coastal towns**

Many commentators have focused on the difficulties facing deprived coastal towns and satellite towns, such as Blackpool and Oldham. It is right to highlight the poor performance of these areas, but this should not obscure the fact that some major cities also struggle to raise attainment among disadvantaged pupils at secondary school age. In Liverpool, Sheffield and Leeds, less than a third of disadvantaged pupils achieve five good GCSEs including English and maths. This is a reminder that policymakers should not take their eye off the ball when it comes to school improvement in big cities.

#### **6. Northern schools have a harder job, and should be compensated for this**

Once school intake has been controlled for, the North East and North West come out as two of the highest-performing regions in the country (alongside London). Contextual value-added scores should not be used to make an 'excuse' for low overall attainment: raw results are hugely important for the individual pupils concerned. Rather, they should be used to show that schools in the north of England may actually have a harder job than those in other parts of the country, due to their more challenging intake, and need to be adequately compensated for this.

#### **7. Schools in the North receive fewer resources than those in London**

Despite often operating in harder contexts, schools in the north of England do not receive the same level of inputs as those in London. On average, northern primary schools receive £4,600 per pupil, which is £900 less than in London; northern secondary schools receive £5,700 per pupil, which is £1,300 less than in London. Some areas of the North can also find it particularly difficult to recruit and retain teachers, and there are more 'cold spots' without access to support from teaching schools. This suggests that the government should use its forthcoming review of the national funding formula to actively weight funding more heavily towards areas of the country which have high levels of disadvantage and which find it difficult to recruit teachers. It should also find ways to target teaching and leadership support to these cold spots – for example, by establishing professional development programmes or introducing student loan write-offs for those working in challenging contexts, and embedding programmes such as the National Teaching Service and Teach First, which are already geographically targeted.

# FOREWORD

Our ambition as a nation must be to ensure all children, no matter their background or location, have a world-class education and access to opportunities to succeed. Otherwise it is a tragedy for those children – and for the region as a whole.

The northern powerhouse needs to be built on strong foundations to realise the huge economic potential of the region, driving growth, prosperity and jobs. There is no more important foundation than ensuring the schools of the North provide world-class education, supporting young people to prosper, and providing the qualifications and skills needed to realise economic growth. But we must ensure this opportunity is available to all young people. Too many of our children from low-income backgrounds are still not getting the same opportunities as their wealthier peers.

This report makes it clear that none of us can stop in our efforts. The success which schools in London and a number of other areas across the country have achieved for children from disadvantaged backgrounds must be extended to every school in the North.

It highlights how the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers in the early years is twice as large in the North as it is in the south. Yet it also reveals some strong success and areas of huge potential. Disadvantaged pupils in the North achieve above the national average in primary schools, but have lower attainment at secondary school. There's no inherent reason why this can't change.

We must ensure resources and support get to the schools most in need in the North. The government has a real opportunity to do this through the forthcoming funding formula review, and all of us must work together across business and civic society to play our part.

And if schools are to facilitate the northern powerhouse, we need great teaching and leadership.

I'm proud that this year marks 10 years of Teach First working in northern schools. During this time we have placed over 1,800 teachers and leaders in schools serving low income communities across the North, all committed to tackling educational inequality. I have seen countless stories of success, of schools providing amazing support and stretch to young people, ensuring a child's background has no bearing on their success.

But it is clear there is more to do. I'm pleased to recommit Teach First to working with our partners to support children, schools and communities across the area. I hope this report acts as a rallying cry to tackle educational inequality in the North, as only then will we unleash the skills and talent to build the northern powerhouse.

**Brett Wigdortz OBE**  
*Founder & CEO, Teach First*



# 1. INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGES FACING THE NORTHERN POWERHOUSE PROJECT

The ‘northern powerhouse’ is a potent agenda. Led by the chancellor, its intent is to rebalance the UK economy by promoting investment in the north of England and devolution to its major cities. This agenda can be seen first as a powerful political ‘brand’ and second as a broad-brush economic strategy (Lee 2016).

The chancellor introduced the idea in June 2014 as follows:

*‘The cities of the North are individually strong, but collectively not strong enough. The whole is less than the sum of its parts. So the powerhouse of London dominates more and more. And that’s not healthy for our economy. It’s not good for our country. We need a northern powerhouse too.*

*‘Not one city, but a collection of northern cities – sufficiently close to each other that combined they can take on the world. Able to provide jobs and opportunities and security to the many, many people who live here, and for whom this is all about. You know, if you brought together the best players from each of the Premiership teams in the North, you’d have a team that would wipe the floor with any competition. We need to bring the cities of the North together as a team – that’s how Britain will beat the rest.’*

Osborne 2014

As an economic strategy it builds upon decades of intellectual and political groundwork. The potential of the northern economy has been championed by northern cities for many years – from Greater Manchester’s Independent Economic Review in 2009, through to IPPR North’s strategy for northern economic growth – *Northern prosperity is national prosperity* – in 2012.

## 1.1 THE STATE OF THE NORTH

The north of England has the foundations of a powerhouse economy. Some 15 million people live within its three regions – the North East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber. Its economy is worth £304 billion, just under a fifth (18.9 per cent) of the national economy (ONS 2015). It is bigger than all of the devolved nations’ economies combined, and if it were a country would rank as the eighth largest in the EU (Eurostat 2016).

The northern powerhouse agenda rightly highlights the North's potential, rather than focusing on its weaknesses. The 'north-south divide' may be a useful catch-all term to describe imbalances in the British economy, but it does not reflect reality. In general, the North does perform poorly when compared to the country as a whole, against a number of economic and social indicators – but the inclusion of London in figures for the greater south distorts the comparison. The North's economy as a whole performs only marginally below other non-London regions against key measures of economic growth rates and productivity (Cox and Raikes 2015a). When subregions *within* the North are brought out within the analysis, there are several areas which outperform the national average, in both cities and rural areas (ibid). Finally, it is important to recognise that London's high productivity does not feed through to higher rates of employment nor reduce levels of poverty in the capital.

The North has many assets. Its five major cities are home to 11 million people. It has 29 universities that educate more than half a million students. The eight major ports in the region are vital to the UK economy, and in the North East has consistently underpinned the only positive balance of trade for any UK region (ONS 2015, HESA 2015, HMRC 2016). However, the success of the northern powerhouse should not be measured by economic growth alone, but on how the North can balance higher productivity with higher-quality employment. Labour productivity is the crucial measure of economic success, and if the North matched the rate of labour productivity in the rest of the UK outside of London, it would be £29 billion (9.5 per cent) bigger, and boost the national economy by 1.8 per cent (author's analysis of ONS 2016a).

The North clearly has economic potential, but the success of the northern powerhouse should not be measured by economic growth or productivity alone. Economic and social objectives need to be met together if northern growth is to bring long-term and equitable prosperity to the region. Many people in the North need better-paid entry-level jobs with opportunities to train and progress; in this respect, the North is just like London. If the northern powerhouse is to do anything other than push up the economic figures, then this needs to be the focus too (Cox and Raikes 2015b).

## **1.2 IDENTIFYING CLEAR OBJECTIVES FOR THE NORTHERN POWERHOUSE**

IPPR North has long argued that the national interest is best served if the North counterbalances London's economic dominance (IPPR North and the NEFC 2012). Our case, like the chancellor's, rests not on charitable sentiment for a region supposedly trapped in decline, but on the potential of that region to prosper, and for that prosperity to be in the wider national interest. The evidence for this case ranges from economic analyses of the North's untapped potential to increasing wariness of London's economic fragility (ibid, Cox and Raikes 2014, 2015a, 2015b).

Northern cities themselves rightly take the view that economic growth cannot be pursued in isolation. They make the case that the northern powerhouse agenda must focus on economic growth alongside public-sector reform (see for example CGC 2014, Core Cities 2014). They recognise that, while a city's economy must grow in order for jobs to

be created and wages to rise, growth alone will not necessarily secure these outcomes. A range of research now shows that there is little relationship between growth of cities and reduction in poverty (see for example Lee et al 2014).

### 1.3 CREATING A FOCUS ON SKILLS AND SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH

Skills are fundamental to the North's social and economic objectives. The northern powerhouse project has thus far focused on transport connectivity, but education, attracting and retaining skilled migrants and graduates, and improving the learning and skills of the North's workforce are more important to its economic growth than any other single area of policy (OECD 2012). IPPR North highlighted this as the key issue for the northern powerhouse in 2015 (Cox and Raikes 2015b), and as the chancellor himself stated in his 2016 budget speech:

*'We're going to focus on the performance of schools in the North, where results have not been as strong as we'd like. London's school system has been turned around; we can do the same in the northern powerhouse.'*

Osborne 2016

The National Infrastructure Commission has also stressed that the northern powerhouse must extend beyond transport. The first recommendation of its report on northern transport connectivity states that:

*'Improving connectivity between the cities of the North will not be sufficient to create the northern powerhouse, but is necessary. Transformations in transport connectivity should form part of a broader strategy incorporating improvements in education, workforce training, research and innovation, spatial planning and wider infrastructure investment.'*

NIC 2016

Only through schools can a major structural change be made to the North's labour force. Each year in the North, around 160,000 young people finish key stage 4 (DfE 2016a), and this is their best opportunity to get the level 2 qualifications associated with improved employability. Estimates suggest that between 2012 and 2022, the vast majority of job opportunities (96.2 per cent) will require qualifications at this level (UKCES 2014). As Ofsted chief inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw has noted: 'the northern powerhouse will splutter and die if their youngsters lack the skills to sustain it' (Ofsted 2016a).

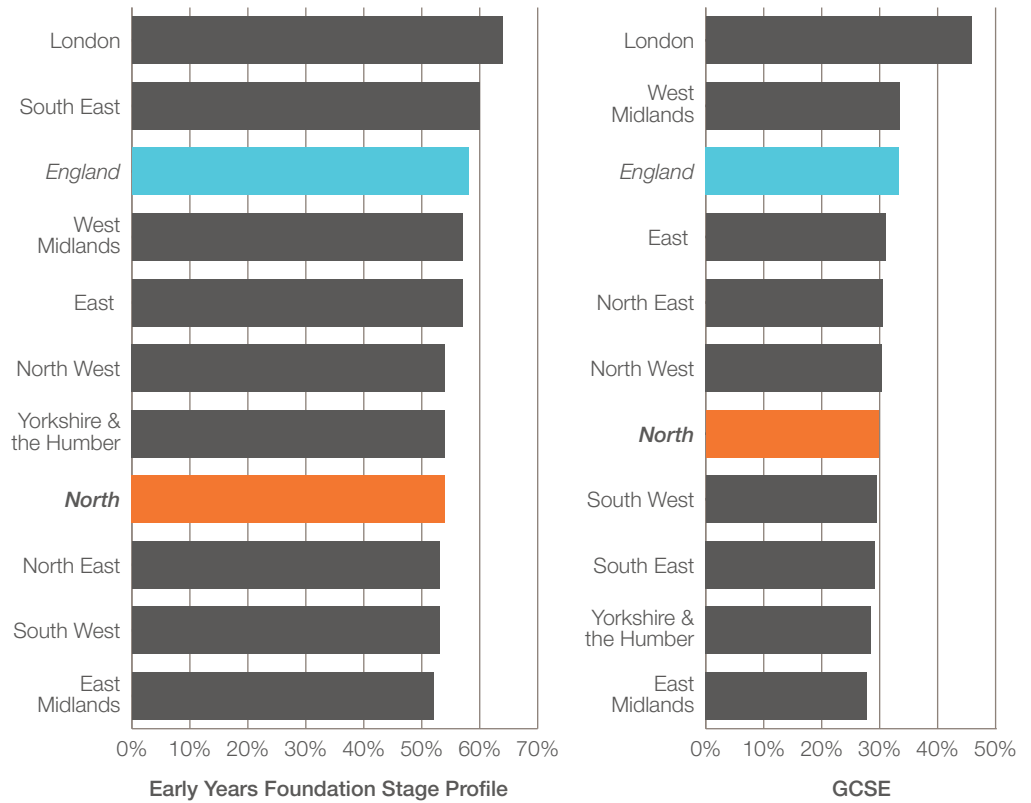
And educational outcomes in the North do appear to lag behind those of the 'powerhouse' that is London. Previous IPPR North analysis has shown that, in simple terms, there is a north-south 'gap' between results for children in the North and the south (Cox and Raikes 2015b). Across England, children from poorer homes are less likely to attain the highest grades than their better-off peers, but this gap is wider in the North. Differences begin to emerge at the very earliest assessments, and persist through to GCSE level and beyond (ibid).

Figure 1.1 presents the key headline statistics on this, and shows how children from the most deprived homes in London outperform children from comparable backgrounds in the rest of the country. The northern regions consistently have results which are below the national average.

**FIGURE 1.1**

**Educational attainment by children from poorer homes is consistently worse in the North than across England as a whole and particularly in London, at early years and GCSE level**

*Most deprived decile achieving good level of development at early years foundation stage profile, by region (2014/15), and pupils receiving free school meals achieving five or more A\*-C grades at GCSE including English and maths, by region (2014/15)*



Source: Department for Education, 'Early years foundation stage profile results: 2014 to 2015' (DfE 2015a) and 'Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England: 2014 to 2015' (DfE 2016a)

However, statistics for the whole of the northern region obscure important differences within the North, which reflect challenges and initiatives in local areas and individual schools. A detailed analysis of outcomes for northern schools is required in order to gain a more nuanced understanding which might form the basis for effective policy interventions.

#### 1.4 OUR RESEARCH AND THE STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

This project offers an initial step in this direction. We have reviewed some of the relevant literature and analysed key datasets. Our findings are presented alongside case studies drawn from interviews with senior teachers at selected schools, and insights from a focus group with Teach First teachers.

These approaches have allowed us to sketch out the nature of the problem, and outline some ideas for policy interventions.<sup>2</sup>

However, the purpose of this report is not definitively to pinpoint the reasons why pupils in different parts of the country underperform. Rather we aim to shed light on the key features of northern schools against the backdrop of the northern powerhouse agenda. Chapter 2 sets out the case for putting education at the heart of the northern powerhouse agenda. Chapter 3 assesses the performance of northern schools against key indicators. Chapter 4 presents some case studies of exemplar schools, showing what can be learned from those who are performing well even in challenging circumstances. Finally, chapter 5 makes some broad recommendations for the focus of government policy.

Like the major transport investments that currently underpin the northern powerhouse, it will take a generation or longer to have the economic and social impact that's needed. But better education policy would make a difference right now to young people across the North.

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<sup>2</sup> We conducted a focus group with seven teachers from the Teach First programme who are based in the north west of England. The focus group took place in Manchester in April 2016. Teach First is an education charity which is 'working towards a day when no child's educational success is limited by their socioeconomic background'.

## 2. WHY EDUCATION SHOULD BE AT THE HEART OF THE NORTHERN POWERHOUSE

This chapter outlines why education should be at the heart of the northern powerhouse agenda. It argues that education will be critical for supporting the North's economic growth, improving opportunity for its young people and creating a stronger society. This will help it to compete with London, which has been very effective at improving school results.

### 2.1 SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS WILL BE CRUCIAL TO EMPLOYMENT AND PROGRESSION IN WORK

Education is important in determining individual life chances. Many factors determine a person's pay and employment prospects – demand from employers and competition for jobs are crucial – but education determines how workers are placed within these, something which will only become more important, given the forecast need for higher levels of qualification (UKCES 2014). This is reflected, for example, in the employment and wage rates for those with different levels of qualification. For those without qualifications the employment rate is 48.5 per cent and the median wage is £7.22 per hour, while for those with five or more GCSEs or equivalent the rate is 78.3 per cent and the median wage is £8.61 – a gap of 29.8 per cent and £1.39 per hour (ONS 2014a, 2014b).

Northern growth depends on a skilled northern population. In the OECD's detailed analysis of the determinants of regional growth, higher skills was the top priority for the north of England (OECD 2012). Within that, there is the most to be gained by 'upskilling' those with low qualifications or none (ibid). The North's labour force tends to be lower qualified than the national average, although some areas have high concentrations. As a whole, 71.5 per cent of the North's population is qualified to NQF level 2 or above, compared to 73.4 per cent nationally – southern regions and Scotland tended to have higher-qualified populations (ONS 2016b). However, some rural areas, such as York, North Yorkshire and East Riding, Cumbria and Cheshire, do have quite high concentrations of qualified individuals (ibid).

There are a number of ways to increase skills in the jobs market. Most notably, employers in low-skilled industries will need to train their own staff and ensure they can progress within their organisations.

Schools, however, offer the most effective starting point for raising education levels in the population. Within the North, 160,000 young people reach the end of key stage 4 each year, compared to 78,000 graduates (DfE 2016a, HESA 2015). And without performing well at the



school level, young people will struggle to progress on to those higher levels of study, or to return to education later in life. It is in school where young people can learn the knowledge and skills needed to thrive.

## **2.2 EDUCATION BRINGS A RANGE OF SOCIAL BENEFITS**

Education also brings social benefits which improve the lives of individuals and communities, and impact on wider society, both by reducing public expenditures and influencing its culture and values (see Schuller et al 2004). These are often difficult to quantify, not least because they extend across geographical boundaries and down through generations (McMahon 2006). Key examples include better health and wellbeing, stronger civil society and engagement, and greater social cohesion. For example, rising levels of education are associated with longer life expectancies, reduced rates of disease, and better self-reported health (Eikemo et al 2008, Herd et al 2007), and health outcomes for individuals improve with the number of years spent in education (Groot and van den Brink 2007).

Education affects diverse aspects of civic engagement, including political involvement and interest, tolerance, and institutional and interpersonal trust (Campbell 2006). It can also provide the springboard to further education and work. Investing in education is therefore not just important for the North's economy, but also for strengthening its society and expanding opportunity.

## **2.3 COMPETING WITH LONDON**

Differences between school performance in the North and the south have received substantial attention. In his 2015 annual report, the chief inspector of education, children's services and skills, Sir Michael Wilshaw, writes that, in educational terms:

*'[W]hat we are seeing is nothing short of a divided nation after the age of 11. Children in the North and Midlands are much less likely to attend a good or outstanding school than those in the rest of the country.'*

Ofsted 2015

The report identifies 173 failing secondary schools, of which 130 are in the North and Midlands and only 43 are in the south of England.

A similar division is identified in other studies, and on a variety of measures. For example, an analysis using the new 'Attainment 8' scale found substantially worse outcomes in northern secondary schools, although the distinction was less clear for primaries (Perera and Treadaway 2016). The regional gap may also have become *more* pronounced over time (SMF 2015).

The fact that educational outcomes in the North are falling behind those in London is one of the main reasons that school performance should be at the heart of the northern powerhouse project. If the North is to compete with London for the creation of good-quality jobs and high living standards, then it must match the capital's success when it comes to school results.

While there are a number of demographic factors which might explain London's success, education policy clearly had a role to play (Baars et al 2014: 9, Greaves et al 2014). Among the policy changes which have contributed to building and sustaining the success of London's schools are the city's involvement in the initial implementation of National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (ibid Greaves et al), the introduction of the charity Teach First, the first sponsored Academies Programme, improved support from local authorities, and the 'London Challenge' (Ofsted 2010). Between 2003 and 2010, 286 of the capital's 377 local authority-controlled secondary schools were involved in the London Challenge either as providers or recipients of support, and 142 schools were actively receiving support in 2010 (ibid).

One notable achievement of London's schools is the relatively narrow gap between outcomes for children from deprived backgrounds and their better-off peers. Across England in 2014/15, 36.8 per cent of disadvantaged children gained five or more GCSEs including English and maths. Among children who were not disadvantaged, the figure was 65.1 per cent, a difference of 28.3 percentage points. In London, 48.3 per cent of disadvantaged children attain this level; in the North only 34.0 per cent do so. The gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children is 20.5 percentage points in London and 30.9 in the North (DfE 2016a). There is a strong association between poor educational outcomes and low household income, and England performs particularly poorly in this respect compared to other developed countries (Clifton and Cook 2012).

To compete with other parts of the UK and in the global market, schools in the north of England therefore need to build on their strengths and address their challenges.

### 3.

## THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACING EDUCATION IN THE NORTH

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of the strengths and opportunities facing education in the North of England. It paints a more complex picture of school performance than any simple narrative about ‘northern decline’, and identifies several areas where policymakers should focus their attention.

### 3.1 EARLY YEARS: EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES START BEFORE CHILDREN START PRIMARY SCHOOL

The earliest experiences of education have a profound impact on later outcomes. Evidence from the UK and elsewhere suggests that engagement with formal preschool provision has lasting impacts throughout the school life (Ofsted 2013, NICDH 2002, Melhuish 2002). This is particularly true when that provision is of a high quality and reflects best practice in pedagogy, staff training and knowledge, settings and management (Sylva et al 2004, Hopkin et al 2010, Pascal et al 2013). Although the evidence is still developing, the effects of excellent early education may be particularly pronounced for children from deprived backgrounds (Burchinal et al 2009), possibly lasting into adolescence (Campbell et al 2002). As the ‘Read On, Get On’ coalition highlights, a graduate teacher in every early years setting can have a particularly big impact on disadvantaged children and help to close the attainment gap.<sup>3</sup>

In England, the early years foundation stage (EYFS) assessment is administered to children at the end of the school year in which they turn five. The majority of assessments are conducted in primary schools, although the learning observed will have been gained both during the first months of schooling and in previous formal or informal provision, including nursery schools, childcare settings, family care, and mixtures of all these. EYFS results for England suggest a rapid rise over recent years in the number of children assessed as attaining both the ‘expected standard’ for their age and a ‘good level of development’ (DfE 2015a). This pattern may reflect increased uptake of childcare and higher levels of training and professionalism within the sector, resulting in the exposure of a higher proportion of preschool children to good-quality early years education.

Regional differences in EYFS outcomes are marked (see figure 3.1), and although the improvement seen nationally since 2013 can be observed across England, it is in London and the south where the best outcomes

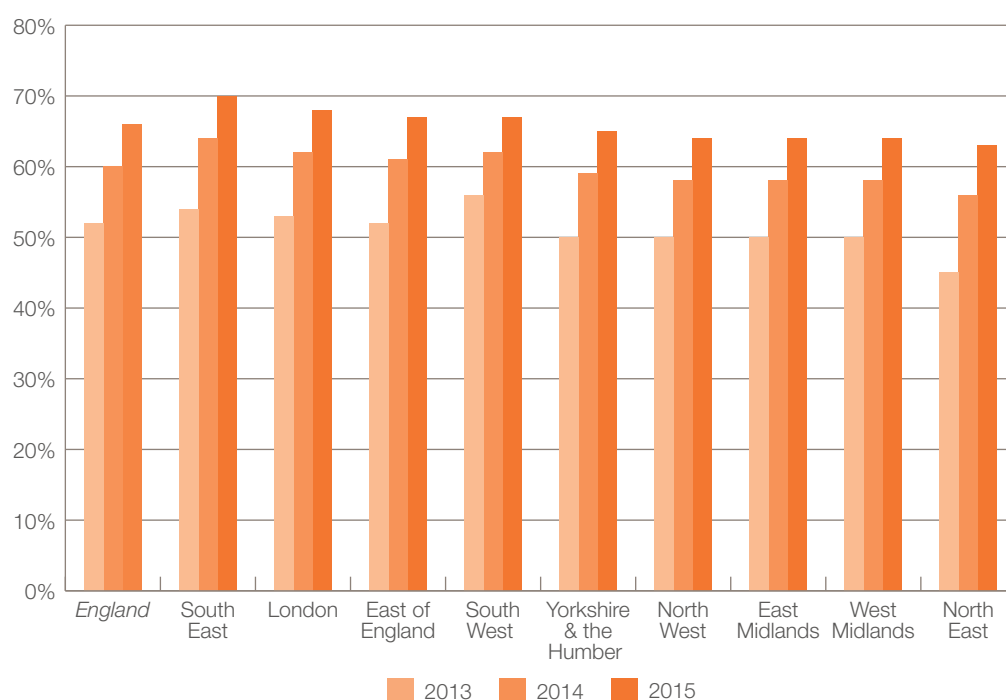
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3 See: <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/get-involved/campaigns/read-on-get-on/england>

have been achieved. The percentage of children assessed as having a ‘good level of development’ in the North ranges from 63 per cent (North East) to 65 per cent (Yorkshire and the Humber), compared with 67 and 70 per cent for London and the South East respectively.

**FIGURE 3.1**

**While there have been improvements across England, pupils in the North lag behind pupils in London and the south in terms of educational development at the beginning of primary school**  
*Percentage of children reaching a ‘good level of development’ at early years foundation stage assessment, by region, 2013–2015*



Source: Department for Education, ‘Early years foundation stage profile results: 2014 to 2015’ (DfE 2015a)

Even at this stage, poorer children are less likely to achieve ‘a good level of development’ than those from better-off homes (see figure 3.2). Nationally, there is a gap of 18 percentage points on this measure between children who are eligible for free school meals and their better-off counterparts. What’s more, there are already regional disparities in the performance of disadvantaged children at the start of primary school. In London, 59 per cent of children who are eligible for free school meals achieve a ‘good level of development’ when they complete reception class at age five, while in the north of England only 48 to 49 per cent of this group do so.

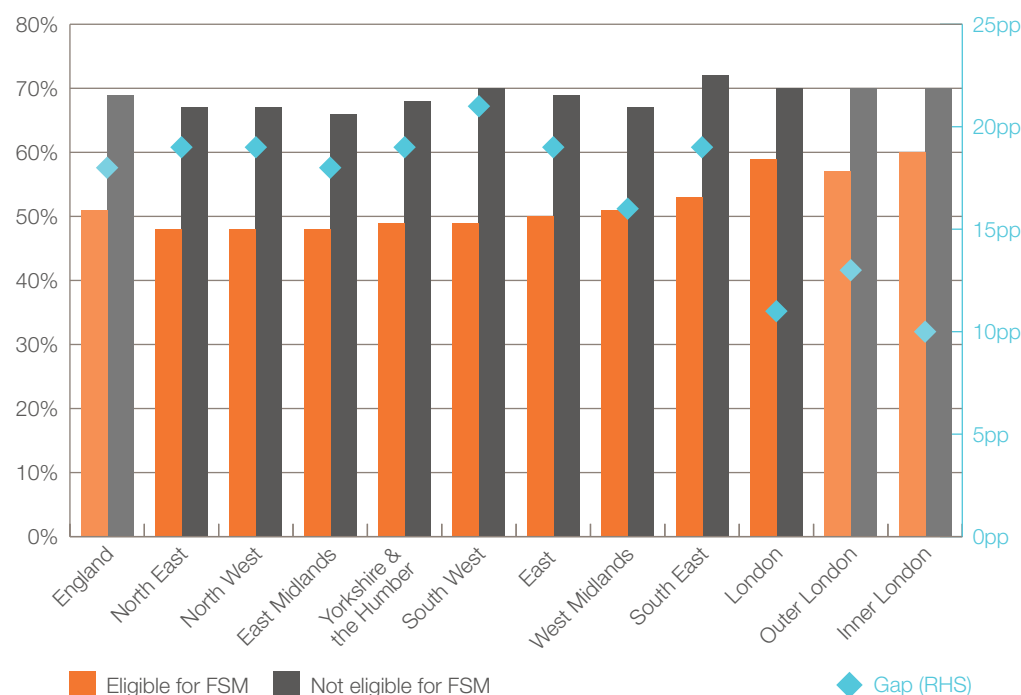
Although far less stark than the regional contrasts seen later on in the school journey, the gap between outcomes for children who are and are not eligible for free school meals is considerably more marked outside London. In inner London there is an early years attainment gap of around 10 percentage points between children who are eligible for free school

meals and those who are not, whereas in the North this attainment gap is around 19 percentage points (ibid). It is not possible to identify what drives this trend, but is likely to reflect a mixture of social and demographic factors, as well as access to early years settings and the quality of provision that is on offer. There is lower attendance at pre-school education for children from low-income backgrounds, impacting on their readiness for school.

**FIGURE 3.2**

**The attainment gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and those who are not is above the national average in the North and much narrower in London**

*Percentage of children assessed as having reached a 'good level of development' at early years foundation stage assessment, by eligibility for free school meals (%), left) and average gap in attainment between pupils eligible and not eligible for free school meals (percentage points, right), by region, 2015*



Source: Department for Education, 'Early years foundation stage profile results: 2014 to 2015' (DfE 2015a)

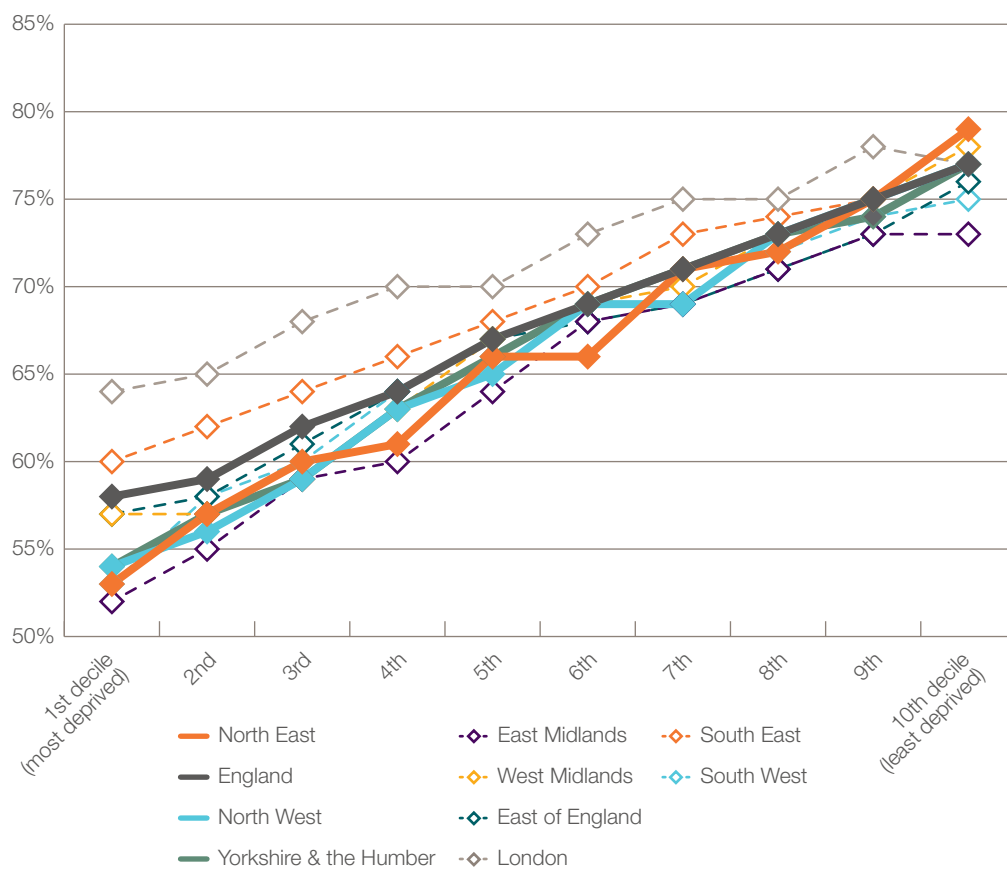
This chart provides a headline measure of the attainment gap between children who are eligible for free school meals and those who are not. This is inevitably a crude and binary distinction between two large groups of pupils. A more nuanced way of measuring educational inequality is to look at how pupils perform on a scale of disadvantage. Figure 3.3 plots early years attainment against a more detailed scale of deprivation, with children from the most deprived backgrounds at the left and children from the wealthiest backgrounds at the right. It shows that the problem is not just that a single block of children receiving free school meals are failing to meet a basic level of education. Rather, there is a strong

and consistent link between socioeconomic background and level of attainment right across the scale. It is therefore not possible to identify a clear ‘threshold’ of deprivation at which performance drops off.

**FIGURE 3.3**

**There is a strong and consistent link between socioeconomic background and level of attainment across England**

*Percentage of children assessed as having reached a ‘good level of development’ at early years foundation stage assessment, by IDACI index of deprivation, by region, 2015*



Source: Department for Education, ‘Early years foundation stage profile results: 2014 to 2015’ (DfE 2015a)

The chart also shows that educational inequalities in the north of England reflect *both* low outcomes for the poorest group *and* better ones for the wealthiest than elsewhere. This is especially true in the North East, where the majority of pupils perform below the England average but the wealthiest 10 per cent of pupils perform particularly well.

So it is clear that differences in educational outcomes between London and the North appear before children even start school. However, these regional headline figures mask considerable variation between outcomes for children in different local authority areas within the North. These show how regional averages can oversimplify a complex picture (see figure 3.4).

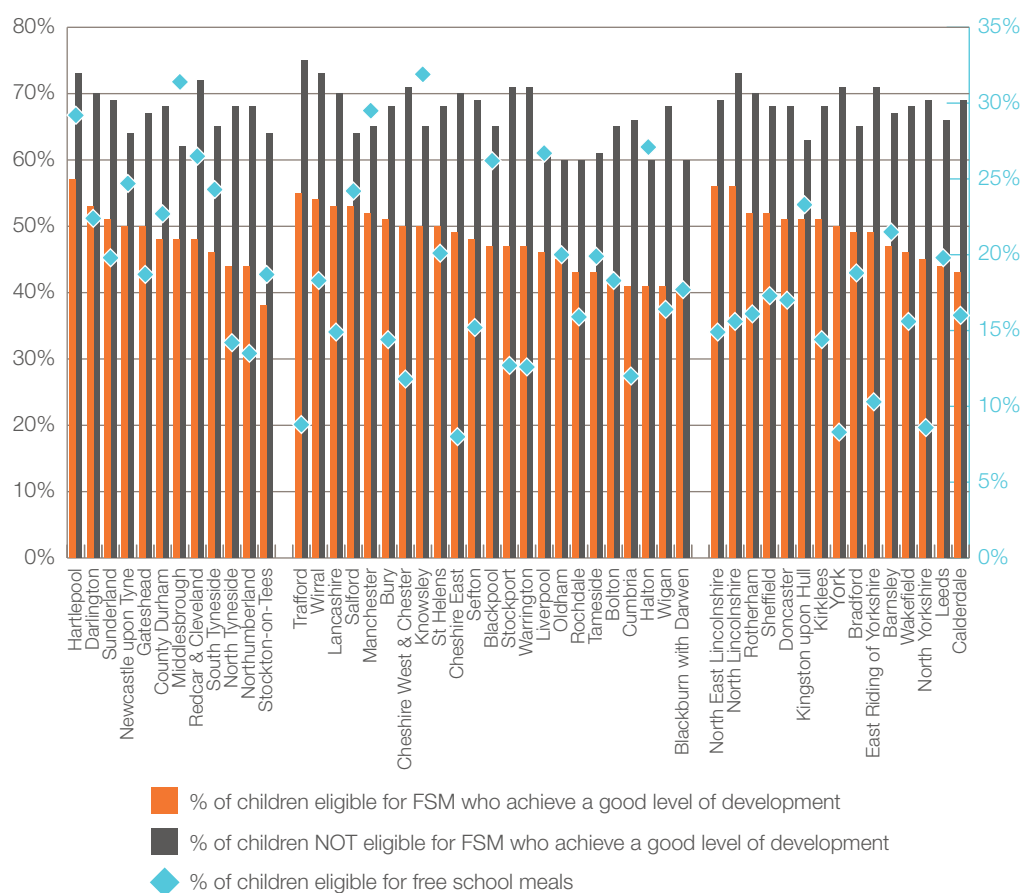


In Hartlepool, for example, 58 per cent of children eligible for free school meals achieve a good level of development (the same as in London), whereas in Stockton-on-Tees only 38 per cent do so (making it one of the worst-performing local authorities in the country). This demonstrates that high levels of deprivation need not be associated with poor outcomes, even at this early stage – and that children in the North enter school with very different levels of readiness.

**FIGURE 3.4**

**Within the North, early years attainment differs greatly between local authority areas**

*Percentage of children assessed as having reached a ‘good level of development’ at early years foundation stage assessment, by eligibility for free school meals (left) and proportion of children eligible for free school meals (right), by northern local authority area, 2015*



Source: Department for Education, ‘Early years foundation stage profile results: 2014 to 2015’ (DfE 2015a)

**Summary**

- Educational inequalities start before school age.
- In London, 59 per cent of children who are eligible for free school meals achieve a ‘good level of development’ when they complete reception class at age five, compared to just 48 per cent of children in the north of England. What’s more, the early years gap between children from

poorer and wealthier homes is almost twice as large in the north of England as it is in London. Until now, policymakers have been focused on the performance of northern schools, but this research suggests that they should also pay attention to provision and settings that impact upon children before they even reach this stage.

### 3.2 PRIMARY SCHOOLS: AVERAGE ATTAINMENT ACROSS THE NORTH OBSCURES HIGHLY VARIABLE PERFORMANCE FROM SCHOOL TO SCHOOL

Recent speeches by Ofsted chief inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw paint a picture of northern schools seriously lagging behind the rest of the country. While this may be true in relation to average secondary school attainment, primary school results across the North are actually on a par with those in the rest of England. Some 80 per cent of northern pupils achieve level 4 or above in teacher assessments of reading, mathematics and writing – the same proportion as for England as a whole (DfE 2015b). In fact, as figure 3.5 shows, the North East and North West both perform slightly better than the English average (at 81 per cent) while Yorkshire and the Humber performs below average (at 78 per cent). As with most areas of education, London has the best results for primary schools, with an astonishingly high 84 per cent of pupils achieving level 4 or above in reading, writing and maths (ibid). This suggests that there is no room for complacency among northern schools if they want to catch up with the capital.

**FIGURE 3.5**

The northern regions are around the national average in terms of educational attainment at primary school, but well behind London  
*Percentage of children achieving level 4 or above in reading, writing and maths at key stage 2, by region and local authority area, 2015*



Source: Department for Education, 'National curriculum assessments: key stage 2, 2015 (revised)' (DfE 2015b)

The chart also shows the results for local authorities within each region, revealing substantial local variation. Most local authorities in the North West and North East outperform the English average, and some excel – Redcar and Cleveland, Trafford and Warrington all outperform most London boroughs and all other authorities outside London, with the exception of Wokingham. Meanwhile, the majority of authorities in Yorkshire and the Humber have results below the national average (ibid).

It is clear that there is a lot of variation in primary schools results between local authorities. Some local authorities perform extremely well – better than those in London or than many academy chains. These local authorities are an important source of expertise in the system that must not be lost as more schools convert to become academies.

Nationally, 66 per cent of children eligible for free school meals attain level 4 or above at KS2 in reading, mathematics and writing, compared to 83 per cent of other children, an attainment gap of 17 percentage points. Those in the North East and North West actually perform better than the national average, with 67 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals meeting the benchmark. Meanwhile those from Yorkshire and the Humber perform below the national average, with just 62 per cent meeting the benchmark.

Figure 3.6 shows attainment at key stage 2 for local authorities in the North. Not surprisingly, given the statistics we've noted already, those in the North East perform particularly well, with all but three of its local authorities scoring above the national average on primary school attainment for pupils eligible for free school meals. Some local authorities achieve results that would be the envy of many London boroughs – in Redcar and Cleveland, 71 per cent of disadvantaged children attain level 4 or above in all three subjects, while 91 per cent of other pupils attain at this level. Meanwhile the picture is rather more worrying in the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber, where more than two-thirds of local authorities have an attainment gap between poorer and wealthier pupils that is above the national average. In Yorkshire and the Humber, just one local authority – Kingston-Upon-Hull – has a rate of attainment for disadvantaged pupils which is above the national average for similar pupils (DfE 2015b).

Following the success of the various 'city challenge' initiatives in the 2000s,<sup>4</sup> policymakers have tended to single out deprived coastal towns and suburbs (such as Blackpool and Knowsley) as a cause for concern. But perhaps surprisingly, our analysis reveals that the stronger outcomes for deprived pupils in city areas – a regional version of the 'London effect' – does not emerge for the North. Greater Manchester and Liverpool do stand out within the North West, but within Yorkshire and the Humber the bottom half of the rankings are dominated by major cities, including Leeds, Sheffield, Bradford and Doncaster. Similarly, within the North East, Newcastle and Middlesbrough have some of the lowest results for disadvantaged pupils. This suggests that policymakers and practitioners should not take their eye off the ball when it comes to tackling education inequality in the big northern cities.

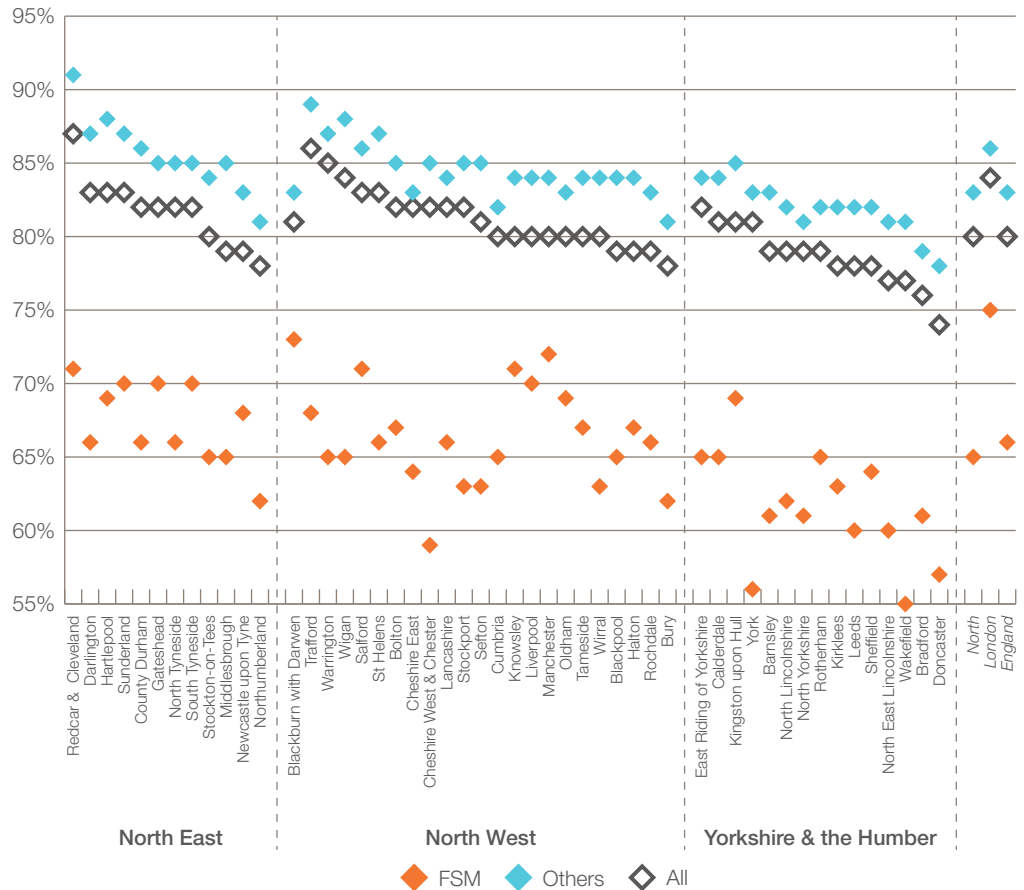
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4 See Hutchings et al 2010 for a detailed discussion of the city challenge programmes.

**FIGURE 3.6**

Overall primary school attainment and the gap between attainment by pupils eligible and not eligible for free school meals varies widely between local authorities across the North

*Percentage of children achieving level 4 or above in reading, writing and maths at key stage 2, by eligibility for free school meals and local authority area, 2015*



Source: Department for Education, 'National curriculum assessments: key stage 2, 2015 (revised)' (DfE 2015b)

**Summary**

- The north performs at a national average level in terms of primary school attainment and on measures of educational inequality. The North East and North West perform particularly well, while Yorkshire and the Humber lags behind.
- There are some very high performing local authorities which have results that would be the envy even of some London boroughs. These authorities represent an important source of improvement capacity in the system.
- Educational inequality is not just a problem for satellite and coastal towns – some major northern cities also struggle to raise attainment among disadvantaged pupils.

### 3.3 SECONDARY SCHOOLS: RESULTS IN THE NORTH ARE POORER, BUT CONTEXT IS CRUCIAL

#### Overall attainment

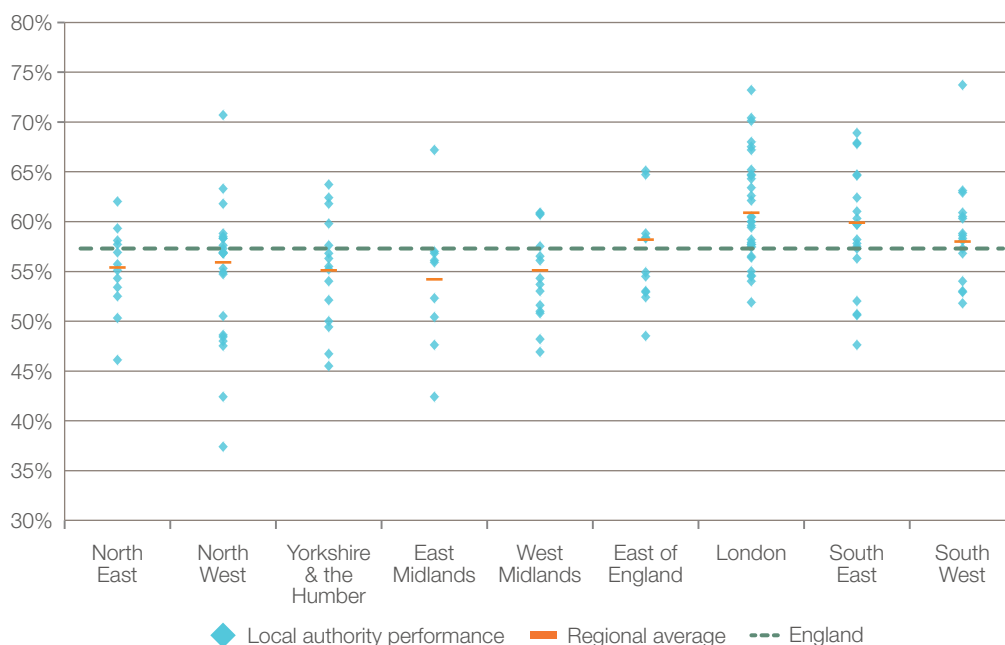
The comparatively strong performance of northern schools is not sustained at the secondary phase. Outcomes across the region are slightly poorer than for the rest of the UK and well below those in London. Across the North as a whole, 55.5 per cent of pupils attain ‘five good GCSEs’: five or more A\*–C grades including English and maths, which is the government’s ‘benchmark standard’. This compares to 57.3 per cent across England as a whole,<sup>5</sup> and 60.9 per cent in London (DfE 2016a).<sup>6</sup> In terms of attainment at GCSE level, only 56 northern secondary schools rank in the top 313 nationwide (or the top 10 per cent of schools).

Despite this generally worrying picture, however, there are some beacons of success which suggest that sustained secondary school improvement is possible across a local authority area. Across the North, 22 local authorities have outcomes above the national average and one (Trafford) has the third-highest results in the country.

**FIGURE 3.7**

#### Northern regions are below the national average in terms of educational attainment at secondary school

*Percentage of children achieving five or more A\*–C grades at GCSE including English and maths, by region and local authority area, 2014/15*



Source: Department for Education, ‘Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England: 2014 to 2015’ (DfE 2016a)

5 Comparisons are of state-funded schools (including academies and city technology colleges), and exclude pupils recently arrived from overseas.

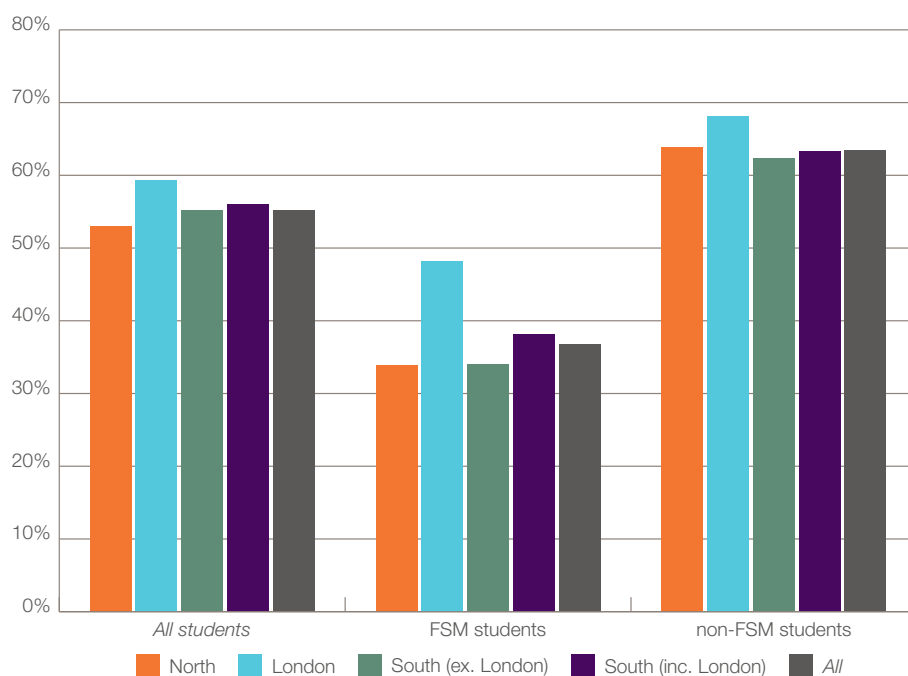
6 Among state-sector schools only.

It is also at secondary level that the gap associated with disadvantage becomes particularly stark (see figure 3.8).<sup>7</sup> In the north of England, 34.0 per cent of disadvantaged pupils achieve five good GCSEs, compared to a national average of 36.8 per cent and an astonishing 48.3 per cent in London.

**FIGURE 3.8**

**Overall secondary school attainment is lower in the North, and the gap between attainment by pupils eligible and ineligible for free school meals is particularly severe**

*Percentage of children achieving five or more A\*–C grades at GCSE including English and maths, by eligibility for free school meals and high-level region, 2014/15*



Source: Department for Education, 'Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England: 2014 to 2015' (DfE 2016a)

Outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in northern local authorities are rarely above the national average for this group of 36.8 per cent, and not a single northern local authority matches London's average.

Figure 3.9 below shows the attainment gaps between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils broken down by local authority area. It reveals a picture of poorer pupils falling behind across the board. The North East and Yorkshire and the Humber perform particularly badly in terms of the size of the attainment gap. The North West has a few examples of authorities which have a narrower attainment gap than the national average (including Blackburn with Darwen, Halton, Bury, Bolton,

<sup>7</sup> The definition of a 'disadvantaged' pupil used here follows that of the School Performance Tables and refers to a pupil who has been eligible for free school meals in the past six years, who has been looked after continuously for one day or more, or who has been adopted from care. See: [http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/download/Statement\\_of\\_Intent\\_2015.pdf](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/download/Statement_of_Intent_2015.pdf)

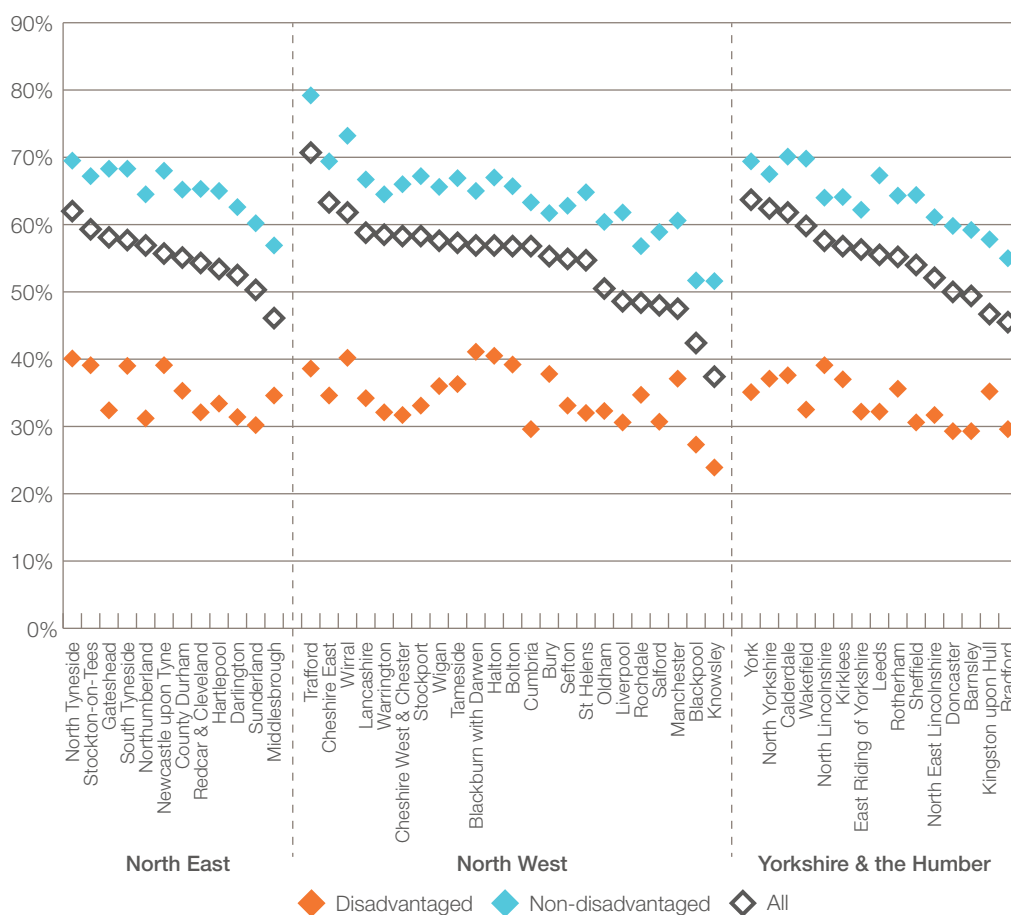


Manchester and Rochdale) but very few are able both to achieve this and sustain high overall standards. As with primary schools, several large cities struggle to raise attainment among disadvantaged pupils, in addition to coastal and satellite towns.

**FIGURE 3.9**

**Overall secondary school attainment and the gap between attainment by disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils varies widely between local authorities across the North**

*Percentage of children achieving five or more A\*–C grades at GCSE including English and maths, by eligibility for free school meals and local authority area, 2014/15*



Source: Department for Education, 'Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England: 2014 to 2015' (DfE 2016a)

Our analysis of educational attainment in secondary schools and the regional variations we have highlighted mean that it is worthwhile investigating and clarifying some particular aspects of this story.

**Context matters**

So far, this section has examined the absolute outcomes for different secondary schools in the north of England. This is an important measure of success, since pupils will compete for jobs and university places on the basis of their raw attainment.

However, a number of researchers have noted that a school's wider community and its particular mix of pupils can have an impact on its outcomes, and raw attainment is therefore not a full assessment of a school's quality. Although notoriously difficult to construct, measures of 'contextual value-added' allow us to compare school outcomes once details of context and pupil demographics have been taken into account. Rebecca Allen (2016) shows that using measures of contextual value-added reveals a very different picture of school performance across the country (see figure 3.10). On this measure, schools in the North East are the best in the country. They add more value to their pupils' learning than those in any other part of the country, all other things being equal.

**FIGURE 3.10**

**Secondary schools in the North East add more value to their pupils' learning than those in any other part of the country**

*Contextual value-added measure of secondary school attainment at age 16 (GCSE), by region, 2014/15*



Source: Reproduced from 'Every school contains a story of how educational inequalities emerge' (Allen 2016)  
 Note: Contextual value added (CVA) measures the progress a pupil makes and takes into account factors outside of the school's control which are known to have an impact on learning, such as levels of deprivation, special education needs and gender.

Contextual value-added scores should not be used to make 'an excuse' for low overall attainment. Rather, they should be used to show that schools in the north of England may actually have a harder job than those in other parts of the country – because their pupil intake is different – and that they may need to be adequately compensated for this.

The data paints a more nuanced story about school performance than raw exam results and Ofsted inspections – which both suggest that northern secondary schools are performing badly compared to the rest of the country. Research has shown that Ofsted inspections closely follow the raw exam results achieved by schools – they are not very good at taking school context into account when assessing performance (Allen 2015a, 2015b; Lupton 2004). This pattern appears to be borne out by the data on northern schools. While on measures of 'contextual value added' schools in the north of England perform reasonably well (as in

figure 3.10), Ofsted inspections find that northern schools perform badly: nearly one in three secondary schools in the north of England are rated as ‘requires improvement’ or ‘inadequate’, compared to one in four in the rest of the country.

This is presumably because inspectors base their assessments on the headline exam results achieved by a school, which raises questions about the ability of Ofsted inspections to take context into account when assessing school performance in the North. Schools that add significant value and progress to pupil learning – but which start with much lower-performing intakes – may find it harder to achieve a good Ofsted rating than those with intakes that are easier to teach. Conversely, schools that add less value to pupils’ learning but have a better-off intake may receive higher Ofsted ratings.

This is significant, because Ofsted ratings are very important for attracting high-quality teachers to a school – something which Ofsted itself has noted (Ofsted 2015, Sec Ed 2016). If Ofsted ratings are just a reflection of a schools’ raw exam results, then they will favour schools operating with more affluent and higher-performing intakes – perpetuating a situation in which these schools can attract the best teachers. In this light, providing accurate assessments of a school’s performance *given their individual context* is very important, because it can have a knock-on effect on their ability to recruit the best teachers and leaders, which is a key driver of improvement (William 2013).

Again, contextual data should never be used as an excuse for expecting low standards from individual pupils. It is right to set a minimum benchmark or expected standard for pupils to meet – since they will compete with their peers on the basis of raw school results and no child’s background should be a barrier to educational attainment. But when it comes to assessing the quality of a school, Ofsted needs to take context into account and the value that school ‘adds’ to their pupils. Otherwise there is a danger that schools operating in challenging circumstances will find it even harder to recruit the best teachers and leaders. The government has already acknowledged this issue, and is taking steps in the right direction – for example, by moving towards a measure of ‘Progress 8’ for school attainment and granting headteachers who take over a failing schools a period of grace to turn the school around before receiving an Ofsted inspection. Still, these measures are not enough to overcome the greater barrier: that Ofsted assesses schools on absolute outcomes rather than how they perform compared to schools in similar contexts.

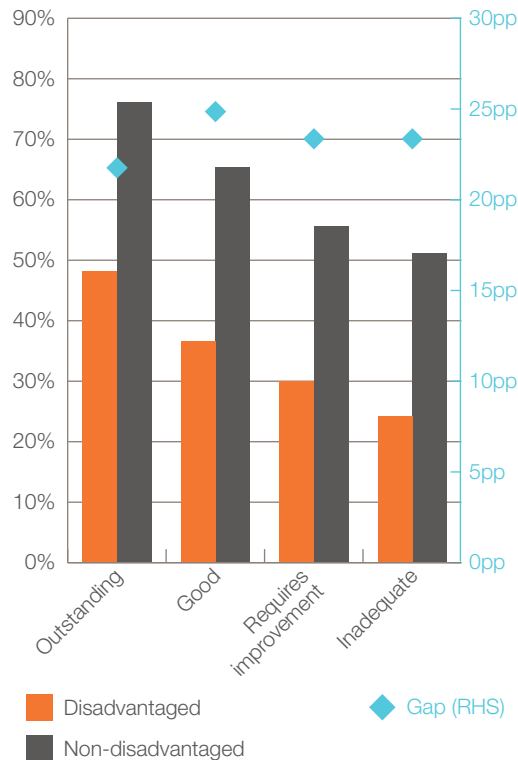
### **Tackling failing schools is not enough: even good and outstanding schools have attainment gaps**

Our research, however, paints a more challenging picture for policy-makers. We examined the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in the north of England depending on the quality of the secondary school they attend (as judged by Ofsted rating), and the results are shown in figure 3.11. Not surprisingly, it shows that disadvantaged pupils in outstanding schools achieve higher results than those in schools with a lower Ofsted rating. Almost half of pupils eligible for free school means in ‘outstanding’ schools achieved the benchmark of five good GCSEs, compared to just over a quarter of those attending schools which were rated as ‘inadequate’.

**FIGURE 3.11**

**Disadvantaged pupils in higher-rated secondary schools achieve higher results than those in lower-rated schools**

*Percentage of children achieving five or more A\*–C grades at GCSE including English and maths, by Ofsted rating of school attended, North only, 2014/15 (% on left) and average gap in attainment between pupils identified as advantaged and pupils not identified as disadvantaged (percentage points, on right)*



Source: Department for Education, 'School and college performance tables' (DfE 2016b) and Ofsted, 'Monthly management information: Ofsted's school inspections outcomes, March 2016' (Ofsted 2016b)  
Note: Data is only for northern state secondary schools where current Ofsted inspection data is available and where full data on the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and their attainment is available, thus capturing pupil attainment at 833 schools.

The chart also shows the size of the gap between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and their peers. The average gap is very similar at schools graded 'outstanding' and those graded as 'requiring improvement', because while disadvantaged pupils perform better at outstanding schools, all the other pupils do to. In short, these schools are good at raising overall attainment, but at least some of them are *less* successful at closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils. Even if the government was able ensure that every school was rated 'outstanding' – which of course would be very difficult to do – this data suggests that the attainment gap would persist.

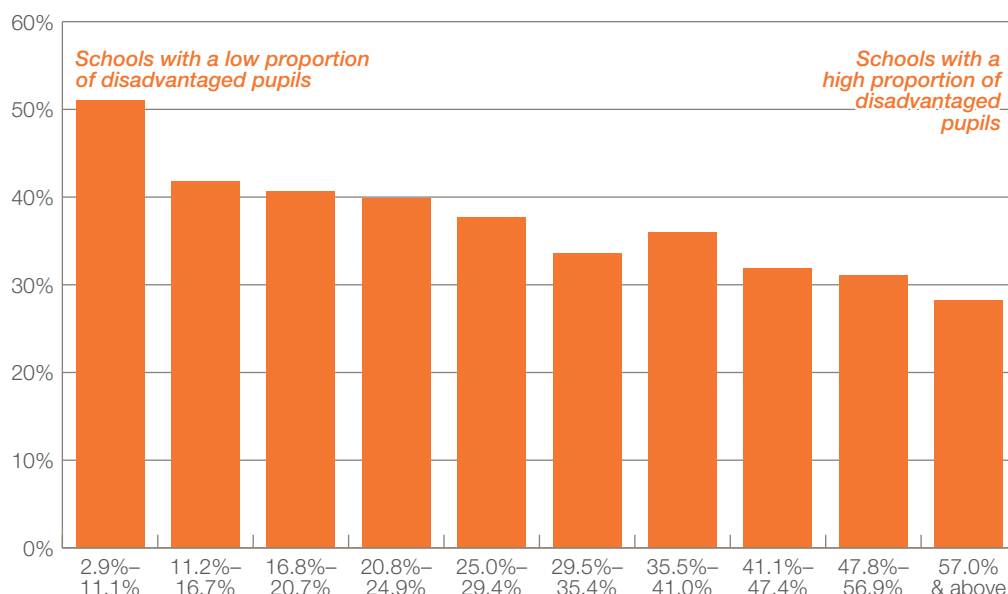
This is an important reminder that government policy must not just focus on a handful of poorly performing schools. It must also identify policies to tackle variation within schools – even those which appear,

on many standard measures, to be performing well. This suggests there should be greater focus on improving how schools deploy their resources (to ensure that disadvantaged pupils benefit from good teachers and pupil premium funding), and how they monitor and intervene when pupils fall behind (such as the effective use of data and rolling out proven pedagogical interventions or catch-up tuition).

**Improving results in schools with large numbers of disadvantaged pupils: a key part of the challenge**

Our analysis also revealed that the North faces a particular challenge at improving attainment in secondary schools which have a large proportion of disadvantaged pupils in their intake. Figure 3.12 shows the proportion of disadvantaged pupils achieving the benchmark of five good GCSEs when schools are sorted according to the proportion of their intake who are identified as disadvantaged. Schools on the left have very few disadvantaged pupils; those on the right have large numbers.

**FIGURE 3.12**  
**Achievement among disadvantaged pupils tends to be higher in northern secondary schools with a lower proportion of disadvantaged pupils**  
*Percentage of children identified as disadvantaged achieving five or more A\*-C grades at GCSE including English and maths, by proportion of pupils identified as disadvantaged at school attended, North only, 2014/15*



Source: Department for Education, 'School and college performance tables' (DfE 2016b)  
 Note: Data is only for northern state secondary schools where full data on the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and their attainment is available, thus capturing pupil attainment at 913 schools.

This is important because the composition of a school's intake itself might affect the school's ability to narrow attainment gaps. It appears, for example, that schools with relatively few disadvantaged pupils are able to serve those pupils reasonably well. This might be because the school can easily target these pupils and give them more attention, or

it might be because there is a 'peer effect', as a result of poorer pupils mixing with better-off classmates. On the other hand, many schools with large numbers of disadvantaged pupils appear to serve this group poorly. This could be because the school is overwhelmed, dealing with particular external circumstances (such as mass unemployment among parents), or has not put in place effective whole-of-school strategies to teach this group. This suggests that policymakers should pay particular attention to addressing attainment in schools with large numbers of deprived pupils, which may require different interventions to those used in other schools.

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### Perspectives on the attainment gap

The attainment gap was raised as an important challenge during our focus group with Teach First teachers from the north west of England. All the teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to tackling social injustice – which was a key reason for joining the programme.

These new teachers were committed to raising attainment – and acknowledged the importance of exam results. But there was anxiety that some schools could become solely focused on exams with detrimental consequences for pupils learning, engagement and development. They were concerned about the extent to which their pupils could be reluctant to engage in independent thought, and about their 'expectation' that teachers would always 'tell them exactly what to do'.

*'Schools should develop the "soft skills" and develop those opportunities, but they have to get the results as well.'*

*'With too much focus on grades they can lose the skills... important skills like independent thought.'*

They had been surprised at some of the social problems which they had encountered, but also inspired by the opportunity to make a difference. The lack of aspiration and engagement among some pupil groups had come as a shock, and all had found creative and novel ways to address this, in relation to school attainment, intellectual development, and later careers. They stressed the need to address these underlying problems, as well as focus on more narrowly defined classroom learning.

*'I had a top set ... and a lot of students were unaware of the kinds of jobs they could potentially go into ... in more middle-class school maybe they'd say engineering, and these boys were saying mechanic, because they didn't know what an engineer was ... when I told them about engineering that's what they wanted to do. Making them more aware opened up the horizons for them.'*

*'Understand your students. Get to know them. Take account of their culture; honour their culture. This is as important for white working class students as for every other group.'*

*'[You know you've engaged pupils] when you have 10 or 15 kids stay behind in break and argue the toss about formal logic, rather than go outside and run around and swear at each other.'*

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## Summary

- Policymakers should focus their attention on secondary schools in the North – this is the phase which appears to perform poorly on measures of educational inequality. In the north of England, 34 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals achieve five good GCSEs including English and maths, compared to 36.8 per cent in the rest of the country and 48.2 per cent in London.
- When context is taken into account, northern schools appear to perform better. This should not be used as an excuse for low standards, high aspirations must be set for all pupils. But it does explain that schools in the North might have a harder job as a result of their intake and suggests that they need to be compensated for this.
- Focusing on failing schools is not enough: even good and outstanding schools have attainment gaps. Northern schools which are rated ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted have a 22-percentage-point gap between pupils on free school meals and their wealthier peers. This suggests policymakers should focus on tackling variation within all schools, for example by ensuring that schools spend their pupil premium resources effectively.
- Policymakers should pay particular attention to addressing attainment in schools with large numbers of deprived pupils, which may require different interventions to those used in other schools.

### 3.4 FUNDING, STAFFING, AND RESOURCES: ENSURING INPUTS TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM SUPPORT THE OUTCOMES

The previous sections have analysed the outcomes of schools in the north of England, but it is also important to investigate the inputs to a school system. After all, outcomes are the result of both what those inputs are and how they are used.

The two main inputs for a school system are material resources (especially funding) and human resources (in the form of the teaching workforce, leadership and support staff). On both these measures, the north of England has struggled to benefit as much as London.

#### Funding

Recent surveys of school leaders reveal that funding is the biggest cause for concern across the country (The Key 2016). This is perhaps unsurprising given school funding faces a real terms cut by central government, alongside cuts to other budgets that schools benefit from, such as the education services grant.

London’s schools are more generously funded than the rest of the country, largely as a result of historical spending decisions and the fact that the school funding formula compensates them for their higher pay bill (linked to the higher cost of living in the capital). At primary school level, the North receives about £4,600 per pupil in grant funding, which is about the same as the England-wide figure but £900 less than London (DfE 2016c). At secondary level, the North receives around £5,700 per pupil, £100 less than the English average and £1,300 less than London (ibid).<sup>8</sup>

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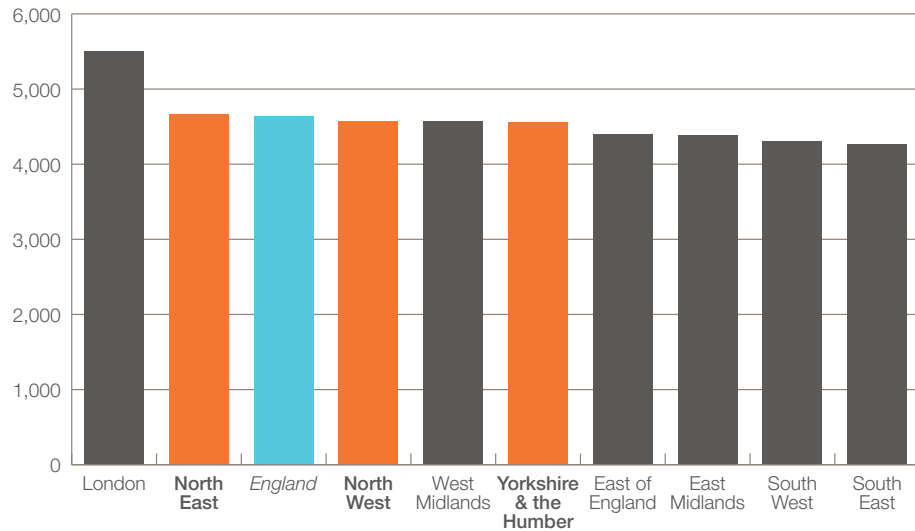
8 For secondary schools including key stage 4.



**FIGURE 3.13**

Northern primary schools receive per-pupil funding that is roughly the same as the England average but less than London schools

*Total expenditure per pupil (FTE) at primary schools, by region (2015)*

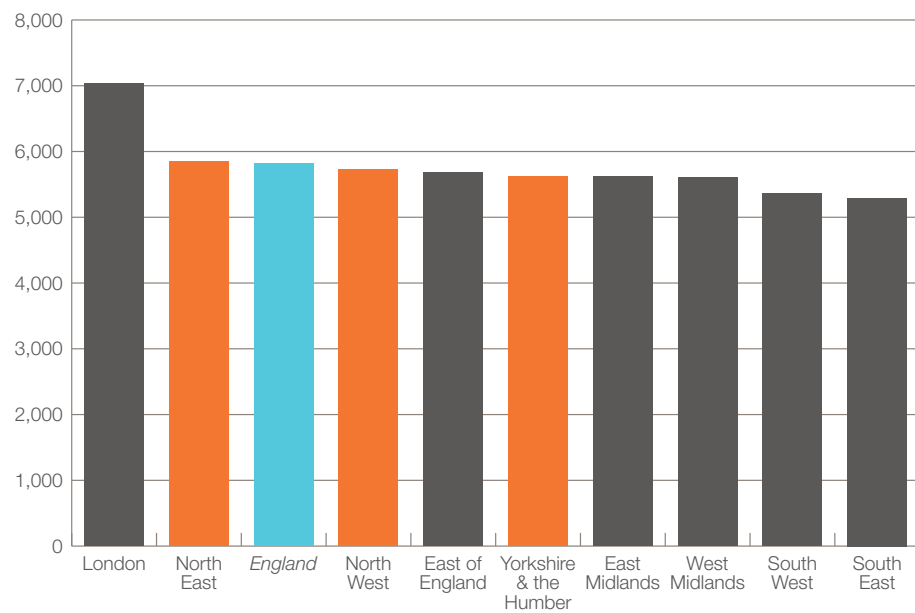


Source: Department for Education, 'School and college performance tables, 2015 download data : Spend per pupil' (DfE 2016c)

**FIGURE 3.14**

Northern secondary schools receive per-pupil funding that is slightly below the England average and significantly below London

*Total expenditure per pupil (FTE) at secondary schools with key stage 4, by region (2015)*



Source: Department for Education, 'School and college performance tables, 2015 download data : Spend per pupil' (DfE 2016c)

The difference in funding is even more marked when comparing different local authorities. The vast majority of London's higher spend is linked to workforce costs: London schools spend £600 more on teaching staff and £100 more on education support staff than the national average, on a per-pupil basis (ibid).<sup>9</sup>

The government is in the process of conducting a review of the national funding formula.<sup>10</sup> This should ensure that schools receive funding based on a transparent formula linked to their intake, and is intended to address historical imbalances in funding that have grown up between different local authorities. However, the impact that the funding formula has on different schools will depend entirely on the relative weightings that the government gives to different factors such as deprivation or prior attainment. Our analysis has revealed the major challenge of addressing educational inequality outside of London, for example: this suggests that the new funding formula should weight funding more heavily towards schools with large numbers of disadvantaged pupils. Pupils facing the double disadvantage of low prior attainment and a low income background should be given the most weighting.

### **Workforce**

Schools do not, of course, rely on financial resources alone. Both the number and quality of staff available to a school will have a fundamental impact on its achievement. The quality of teaching and leadership is especially important for disadvantaged pupils, who tend to benefit from good teaching to a greater extent than better-off pupils (Slater et al 2009).

The recruitment and retention of teachers is a growing concern across the whole of England – and especially so in those areas of the country which struggle to attract people to live. In 2015, one government review heard evidence that 62 per cent of schools had encountered difficulty in obtaining applicants of sufficient quality, and that recruitment difficulties are common across teacher roles, including leadership positions (STRB 2015). The same body notes that despite a projected rise in pupil numbers, teacher recruitment has been below target for two years, and that there is a risk of shortages going forward.

Similarly, teacher retention presents a challenge. Menzies et al (2015) found that 'wastage' – teacher capacity removed from the system by teachers' personal choices – rose from an all-time low rate of 6.5 per cent in 2009/10 to 9.2 per cent in 2014/15, and the majority of teachers in their study had recently considered leaving the profession. This problem does not appear to be linked to any particular route into the profession. And of course, many people who leave the teaching profession may decide to return later on. Nevertheless, when good teachers leave the profession it adds to the wider recruitment and capacity challenge facing school leaders. Although there are widely acknowledged concerns about the recruitment and retention of teachers at the national scale (see for example Howson 2016), accurate local data on this issue is very limited. Headline regional figures show that schools in the North do not have higher vacancy rates than those in other regions, and neither do they report more difficulties with

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9 For secondary schools including key stage 4.

10 See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/schools-national-funding-formula>

recruitment in school surveys (The Key 2016). Official data, however, does reveal that they are forced to operate with slightly fewer members of staff than in London, presumably because they have less funding to spend on staff. This in turn will translate into larger class sizes or heavier workloads. In Yorkshire and the Humber, for example, there are 21.2 primary pupils per teacher, compared 19.7 in London, and 15.2 secondary pupils per teacher, compared 13.9 in London.

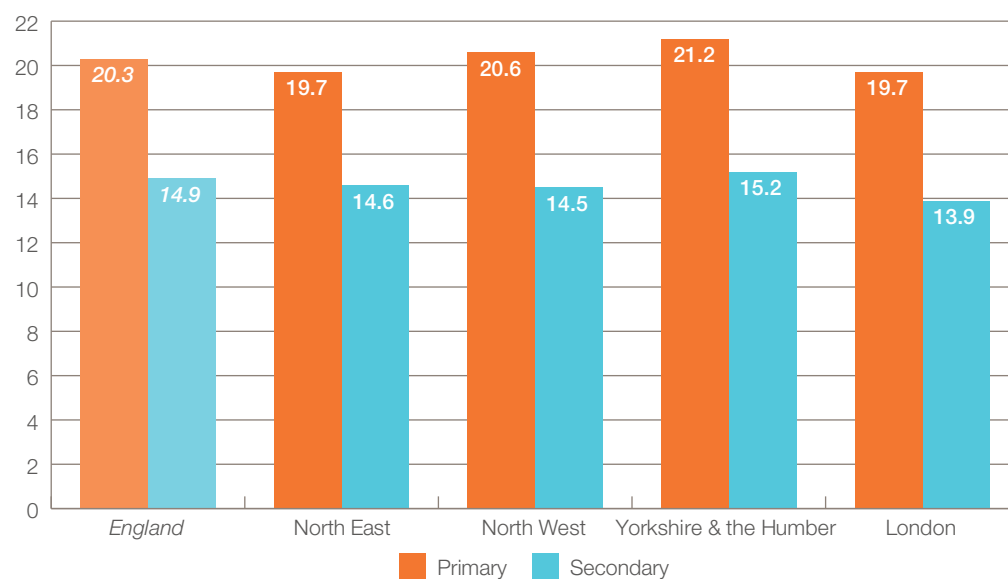
These headline regional figures, however, will obscure the local difficulties that some individual schools are facing. Ofsted (2014) has noted that teacher shortages are particularly acute in coastal areas and disadvantaged regions, which struggle to attract inward investment and migration more generally. There is a wide body of research showing that schools serving disadvantaged communities struggle to attract and retain high-quality teachers.

For example, Allen et al (2016) highlight a particular problem with teacher turnover in secondary schools: teachers in the most deprived secondary schools are, other things being equal, 70 per cent more likely to leave than teachers in a neighbouring more affluent school.

It can therefore be argued that improving teacher recruitment, retention and expertise are a key part of the answer to raising standards and tackling educational inequality. Regional data suggests this is not a distinctively ‘northern’ problem, but it does affect many schools in the North who operate in disadvantaged contexts.

**FIGURE 3.15**

**Pupil-to-teacher ratio, by education phase in England, London and northern regions, 2014/15**



Source: Department for Education, ‘School workforce’ (DfE 2016e)

Any strategy to address this problem will need to focus on two things. First, it must try to attract and train more teachers in areas of

greatest need. This suggests the government should build on existing programmes which target recruitment to particular places, such as the National Teaching Service and Teach First, as well as exploring new programmes, such as writing off student loans for teachers who work in challenging contexts. Second, it must try to develop and improve the quality of the existing teaching workforce in disadvantaged schools, a strategy labelled by Professor Dylan Wiliam as ‘love the one you’re with’ (Wiliam 2013). This suggests the government should provide funding to ‘pump-prime’ high-quality teacher professional development initiatives targeted towards schools in challenging contexts. It should also use its forthcoming review of the national funding formula to explicitly weight funding towards schools in areas which struggle with recruitment, on the assumption that they need more resources to attract and develop staff (in the same way it weights funding towards schools in London to mitigate the high cost of living).

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### **Perspectives on school leadership**

School leadership was raised as an important source of capacity during our focus group with Teach First teachers from the north west of England.

Members of our group were clear about the kinds of school leader who would inspire them as teachers. Leaders should instil clear and consistent systems for certain aspects of the school, such as discipline and behaviour, but most importantly school policies should be presented to staff and pupils along with a clear rationale. They wanted to know why policies were introduced and to avoid mechanistic and ‘tick box’ approaches that are damaging both to teacher morale and pupils’ education. Above all, they wanted to work for leaders who approach their task with an absolute conviction that pupils *can* and *will* succeed, irrespective of their social background, and who make sure that this underpins everything they do.

*‘Tell me why it’s like that and I can get behind it! You can’t just say ‘that’s the way it is’ when so many kids’ futures are involved’.*

*‘My headteacher was an inspiring leader... she had an absolute vision of social justice, and that we’re going to turn the school around for the sake of these kids... it was entirely focussed on the students.’*

*‘I want them to have an opinion and to explain it, defend it and discuss it’.*

*‘Decide a thing you want to do and really do it for a year! Even if it’s not going well after the first three months, stick with it and see what happens. After all, if we’d made a decision about whether to stay in teaching after the first three months...’*

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### **‘School-led’ support services**

Schools seeking to improve also need to draw on external sources of support. Historically, local authorities and universities have been the main providers of school improvement services. However, over the last few years there has been a concerted push towards a ‘school-led’

model of improvement. This emphasises the benefits of collaboration between different schools to challenge and support each other to improve, as well as to sell support services to each other. This is partly modelled on the successful London Challenge programme, as well as systems put in place in other sectors, most notably the creation of ‘teaching hospitals’ in health.

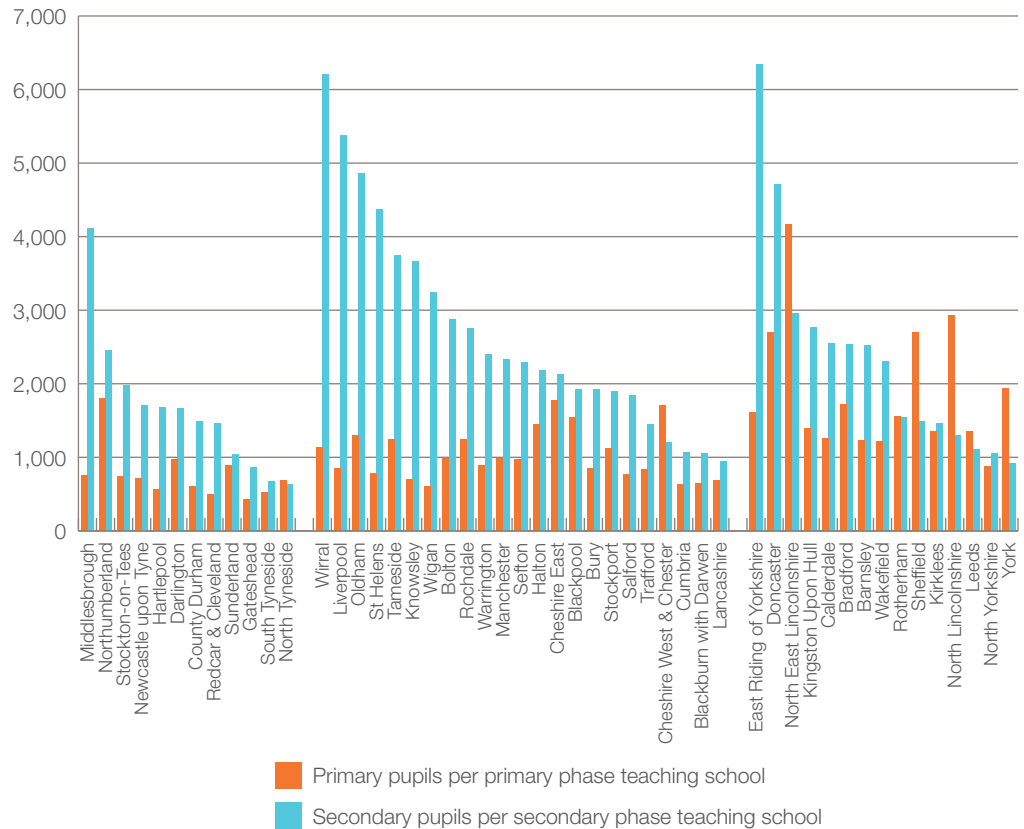
This is a comparatively new policy agenda, and systems of school-led support are still emerging and developing. The main vehicle for encouraging school-led support has been the creation of ‘teaching schools’: outstanding schools which have been provided with a small amount of additional funding to develop support services for use by other schools. Teaching schools are responsible for a range of activities, including initial teacher training, continuing professional development (CPD), conducting and spreading research, and improving leadership. In other examples, organisations such as Teach First, Teaching Leaders and some innovative academy chains are creating opportunities for members of staff to collaborate and learn across a network of different schools. Teachers on the Teach First Leadership Development Programme, for example, have the opportunity for a placement in a second school to learn from their practice.

There are concerns that the move towards a school-led system have not developed evenly across the country. This means that England is in danger of creating a system where high-performing areas are able to work together and improve, while those with fewer outstanding schools are left behind. This was acknowledged in the recent white paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE 2016d), which identified a number of ‘cold spots’ across the country that have not benefited from the creation of these new sources of support. In some places, this will be because other sources of support are available and there is no need to create new ones. But as the push towards a school-led system continues, the absence of teaching schools and other new forms of support in some areas will become an increasing concern.

Figure 3.16 provides a measure of the ‘coverage’ of teaching schools in different local authority areas. It shows that there is a very wide variation in terms of whether schools have access to this form of support. In the North East, for example, there are more than four times as many pupils relative to each primary-phase teaching school in Northumberland (1,808) than in Gateshead (432); in the North West, the figure for the Wirral is six times that of Blackburn with Darwen (DfE 2016d). Among 50 northern local authorities, 24 have more than 2,000 pupils per secondary-phase teaching school; in London, this is the case for just one of 33 areas. Twenty-three northern local authorities have more than 1,000 pupils per primary-phase teaching school, including all but one in Yorkshire and the Humber; in London, this is the case for only 11. The number of pupils per lead or outstanding sponsor academy also ranges greatly, from over 6,500 in Sefton to just 45 in North East Lincolnshire.

**FIGURE 3.16**

**Number of pupils per teaching school, by education phase and northern local authority area, 2014/15**



Source: Department for Education, 'Indicator data: defining "achieving excellence areas" – ad hoc statistical release' (DfE 2016d)

### Summary

- Northern schools suffer from a lack of inputs into the education system compared to London, including fewer financial resources, teachers, leaders and school-led systems of support. Northern secondary schools receive £1,300 less per pupil than schools in London.
- The government should seek to address these imbalances in the forthcoming review of the national funding formula by weighting it more heavily towards areas of deprivation. It should also examine the potential for weighting funding explicitly towards areas of the country which struggle to recruit enough teachers, in the same way that it currently weights funding towards areas with a high cost of living.
- The government should build on existing programmes which target recruitment to particular places, such as the National Teaching Service and Teach First, as well as exploring new programmes, such as writing-off student loans for teachers who work in challenging contexts. The government should also support initiatives to develop the existing teaching workforce in disadvantaged areas, for example through school-led CPD programmes.

## 4. RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

### 4.1 NORTHERN SUCCESS: SCHOOLS WHICH PERFORM WELL

National league tables for secondary schools in England are generally constructed using data on examination results. Common measures include the percentage of pupils attaining five or more A\*–C grades at GCSE or passing a complete English baccalaureate, or the average GCSE points score per pupil. These are highly informative about the overall academic performance of a school, but provide no information on how this relates to inequalities or gaps between groups of pupils.

We have therefore constructed an ‘alternative’ league table to highlight which schools in the North perform well in terms of achieving good outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and narrowing attainment gaps.<sup>11</sup> As we have set out, schools in the North tend to perform poorly on these measures, and so our aim is to identify schools that buck this trend, and in turn to seek to understand the secrets of their success.

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#### **‘Beacons of success’: our methodology for identifying strong performers among northern schools**

We include all state schools that meet the following criteria:

- Percentage of pupils who are categorised as disadvantaged: schools are included in the league table if more than 25 per cent of pupils are identified as disadvantaged, in terms of being eligible for free school meals.
- Percentage of disadvantaged pupils who achieve ‘five good GCSEs’: schools are included in the league table if more than 50 per cent of disadvantaged pupils gain five or more A\*–C grades at GCSE, including English and maths.
- The attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils: schools are included if the gap between the proportions of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils achieving five or more A\*–C grades at GCSE, including English and maths, is 15 percentage points or less.

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Table 4.1 shows the 21 schools that we have identified as ‘beacons of success’ among northern schools.

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<sup>11</sup> See Scott (2016) for a similar attempt to construct a league table that values different types of school performance.



**TABLE 4.1****'Beacons of success' northern schools***Ordered by achievement among disadvantaged pupils*

Local authority	School	Percentage of pupils categorised as disadvantaged	Percentage achieving 'five good GCSEs' benchmark: disadvantaged pupils	Percentage achieving 'five good GCSEs' benchmark: non-disadvantaged pupils	Attainment gap (percentage points)
Bolton	Bolton Muslim Girls School	32%	84%	82%	-2
Kingston-upon-Hull	St Mary's College	25%	76%	79%	3
North Tyneside	Churchill Community College	40%	69%	71%	2
Newcastle upon Tyne	St Cuthbert's High School	27%	68%	71%	3
South Tyneside	St Wilfrid's RC College	28%	62%	74%	12
Kingston upon Hull	Kelvin Hall School	40%	59%	73%	14
North Tyneside	Monkseaton High School	38%	57%	62%	5
Rochdale	Hollingworth Academy	29%	57%	68%	11
Bradford	Dixons City Academy	28%	57%	69%	12
Newcastle upon Tyne	Walker Technology College	62%	55%	69%	14
Manchester	Trinity CofE High School	38%	54%	67%	13
Kirklees	Batley Girls High School	30%	54%	62%	8
Blackburn with Darwen	Pleckgate High School Mathematics and Computing College	37%	53%	61%	8
Wirral	Woodchurch High School	44%	52%	66%	14
Wigan	St John Fisher Catholic High School	26%	52%	61%	9
Kirklees	Nether Hall Learning Campus High School	50%	51%	54%	3
Durham	Dene Community School	60%	50%	64%	14
Oldham	The Hathershaw College	49%	50%	54%	4
Kirklees	Batley Business and Enterprise College	30%	50%	58%	8
Lancashire	All Saints' Roman Catholic High School Rossendale	29%	50%	54%	4
Leeds	Pudsey Grangefield School	26%	50%	59%	9

Notes: Note: Data is only for northern state secondary schools where full data on the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and their attainment is available. A negative attainment gap indicates that attainment for disadvantaged pupils exceeds attainment for non-disadvantaged pupils.

This table reinforces one of our key findings above, that schools with high populations of disadvantaged pupils tend to have low attainment for this group. Only 21 northern schools met our criteria for success, and of these, very few had more than half of their pupils on free school meals. Of the most disadvantaged schools – those with more than 40 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals – there are only five schools in the north where more than half of pupils gain five GCSEs at grade A\*–C.

More positively, our ‘beacons of success’ demonstrate that it is possible for schools operating in challenging circumstances in the north of England to address educational inequality. What’s more, these schools are located in a wide range of areas, including coastal towns, cities and rural areas – suggesting that geography does not have to equal destiny when it comes to educational performance.

## 4.2 FOUR CASE STUDIES OF SCHOOL SUCCESS AND IMPROVEMENT

In this section we will present four examples of schools and school groupings which are at different stages in their own ‘improvement journeys’. Two schools are identified as ‘beacons of success’ in our league table above, while the other two partner with Teach First and are earlier in their improvement journey.<sup>12</sup> They have been selected to give a flavour of different approaches to school improvement operating in challenging contexts in the north of England.

### School A

#### *Context*

School A is a large secondary school in a northern city. Almost 30 per cent of pupils are categorised as ‘disadvantaged’. The school performs well both in its Ofsted inspections and its outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, which are just over 10 percentage points lower than for non-disadvantaged pupils. It has a strong focus on the education of the whole child, grounded in the principles of helping all children to achieve outstanding outcomes, and ‘closing educational gaps’ of all kinds.

#### *What are the key features of its improvement strategy?*

Data-driven planning is at the heart of the school’s strategy. Teachers are nominated as ‘champions’ to lead on provision, inside and outside the classroom, for pupils identified as having specific needs. This is part of a strategy of ‘taking responsibility’ for narrowing the gap between outcomes, and providing an excellent education for every pupil. Many of the important interventions have been built into pedagogic and classroom practice, so that pupils who might become disengaged or peripheral are fully engaged in lessons. And lessons are equally challenging for ‘pupil premium’ pupils as for their peers; equally, these pupils are encouraged to take up ‘challenging’ subjects.

Pupil premium funding is vital. For example, the school uses this resource to reduce class sizes in key subjects, and to timetable flexibly so that it is possible to focus on particular pupils and course content at key points in the year. The fact that the funding is not ringfenced means

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<sup>12</sup> These case studies are based on interviews with senior leaders at each school. They are not intended to be a detailed examination of each school but rather to give a flavour of their approach to school improvement and the challenges they face.

the school can plan and implement strategies locally, and at short notice if necessary. The funding is also used give pupil premium pupils access to books, school trips and other extracurricular activities, such as music lessons. These are all part of building the ‘cultural capital’ of these pupils.

The school has provided extensive CPD for staff to support its strategy. This is peer-facilitated within the school, using high-quality materials selected for their relevance to the school’s particular challenges. A key theme is placing pedagogy in its context and overcoming barriers to learning. Staff engage with research and theory on the issues facing particular groups of pupils, to the extent that this has pervaded the language and culture of the school (‘all the staff can talk about cultural capital’). The approach to CPD helps to embed the agenda of ‘closing the gap’ between outcomes in education as part of the culture of the school. The school works with other members of its academy chain on general school improvement activities, alongside its tailored programmes.

Engaging with families is also a core approach. This involves working with parents and helping them to understand how they can support their children’s learning, emphasising the importance of attendance, and using experts such as behaviour support workers to build relationships. While ‘raising aspirations’ is important, the headteacher stressed that this must be associated with practical steps which families and their children can take.

#### ***What are the main challenges identified for the future?***

The main challenge identified to continuing success is teacher recruitment and retention. Modern teaching careers (including those focused on leadership) often involve a relatively short period of time in any one post, which limits opportunities to develop skills and to ‘get to know’ a school and its community well. When teachers in leadership positions only remain in post for a short time, this creates a risk that skills for long-term planning and delivery will be lost.

### **School B**

#### ***Context***

School B is a large secondary school in a northern town. Almost 30 per cent of pupils are categorised as ‘disadvantaged’. The school performs well both in its Ofsted inspections and its outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, which are just over 10 percentage points lower than for non-disadvantaged pupils. The school has enjoyed considerable success in raising outcomes for its pupils – every group is ‘green boxed’ when results are classified – but is ‘restless’ in its pursuit of ongoing improvement, building on success and adaptation to new challenges.

#### ***What are the key features of its improvement strategy?***

Central to success is a focus on the *meaning* of its mission statement, and a system for embedding this at all levels. Every one of the school’s documents and procedures (from the school improvement plan to individual teachers’ performance management plans) must include details of how the mission can be upheld, through specific, concrete and practical actions. Most strategies apply to all pupils, and those targeted at groups (such as pupil premium pupils) are subtle and discreet.

Engagement in the classroom and in extracurricular activities is key. This is built through absolute expectations and consistent consequences for behaviour, strong and fair boundaries, and extensive strategies to 'get the students involved' in all aspects of life in the school. The school has excellent standards of behaviour and a low exclusion rate. High expectations of pupils are explicitly associated with creating a culture and climate for learning, and fulfilling one's potential. As the headteacher put it, 'the point of school shouldn't just be to get through it'.

The school employs multiple well-evidenced initiatives and practices in its teaching and learning practice. However, the success of these comes partly from their embedding in the context of the school's values and educational ethos. Without these, no single intervention or combination of interventions would act as a 'silver bullet' for improvement. Key examples of practice include:

- An understanding that 'GCSE outcomes are established in year 7', and a focus on transition. Education is a long-term matter, and it is best to prevent problems before they start.
- A high level of teachers with lead practitioner status in core subjects.
- Identification of teachers to act as expert leaders for key topics in English and mathematics following assessment points. These staff provide expert support to pupils who may need additional work to help them improve their learning (and thus attainment).
- Engagement on a one-to-one or small group level with pupils to explain what they need to do to get the grades they need for future opportunities, making revision 'concrete' rather than something that you just do.

Careers guidance and skill-building is a major theme. Support is individually focused and highly detailed, presenting pupils with a range of options, including things which they might not otherwise have considered. Equal value is given to apprenticeships and Oxbridge entrance, and pupils are informed about routes into different kinds of job. Again, this is a long-term project; for example, pupils whose families might not transmit knowledge of how to pursue professional careers are informed early about subject choices, and events with local employers demonstrate how academic subjects, such as science, could lead to a range of employment options.

Yet perhaps the most important aspect of this school's success is a determination that children will appreciate that they have choices in life, and build the confidence to take them. An ambitious and innovative 'skills-based' project of extracurricular activities, in which all pupils participate, is essential to this. It represents a huge investment of staff time and financial resources, but the rewards are clear in the school's outcomes.

#### ***What are the main challenges identified for the future?***

The headteacher did not name any specific challenges; the strong culture of the school and its practical approaches will bring resilience to these as and when they arise.

## **School C**

### **Context**

School C is a large secondary school in northern town. It is a relatively newly formed school, at an earlier stage of its improvement journey than the other two for which interviews were conducted. However, its aspirations for its pupils were similarly ambitious, despite high levels of deprivation in the local area and the school community.

### ***What are the key features of its improvement strategy?***

The mission which this school seeks to live out through its practice and policies is a long-term one, helping pupils to fulfil their potential both immediately and long after they have left formal education. This is seen both as a matter of personal development, and of career planning. The school is making great efforts to raise pupils' awareness of the opportunities for work within the region, and of how education can help them to build a pathway to this work. Engagement with employers is high, for example through workshops, visits and events. The school works hard to provide access to a range of different companies to help pupils understand the employment market and their potential participation in it. This includes making links between academic subjects and jobs. Expanding the geographical horizons of pupils when seeking work is also a theme.

In relation to teaching and learning, the school places substantial emphasis on staff development, and on creating a culture of continuous improvement of teaching practice. A lead practitioner is responsible for a coordinated programme of ongoing CPD for all newly qualified teachers and trainees. This represents a huge investment of staff time and school resources, as eligible staff attend for a half-day every week; however, the impact on both practice and the broader educational environment of the school makes this worthwhile.

The school also uses extensive partnerships to improve the skills of its workforce. For example, partnerships with other outstanding schools in the area and with teaching schools in the region is also key. Teach First is also very important to this strategy; as well as high-quality trainees, the school benefits from networking and sharing of values and expertise. The content of the school's own development programme is informed by these links. Planned future developments include engagement with the Aspire programme and other leadership development opportunities. A key aim of the school's CPD for teachers and leaders is to build the capacity of staff to base decision-making at every level on the school's values and vision.

Teachers are also encouraged to become reflective practitioners within a 'learning community', where teachers themselves are pupils of their profession. Teacher standards are 'distilled' into a set of core skills, and staff are provided with tools to develop these. Equally important is the school's 'holistic and innovative' creation of a culture of reflection. Staff are encouraged continually to 'share and show' their teaching, with lesson observations, 'learning walks' and open-door teaching becoming the norm. Vital to the acceptance of this is an emphasis on learning, reflecting and understanding rather than monitoring or policing: 'dialogue, dialogue, dialogue' is at the heart of the approach. But as well

as traditional discourse and discussion, teachers are provided with a new technological tool to record their own practice, edit these recordings, and use the findings in both private reflection and further sharing and mutual learning with colleagues. Some of this occurs online, allowing teachers the flexibility to engage at a convenient time. Improvements in teaching quality are already visible at an early stage of this initiative.

A further important factor for this headteacher was the quality of the school's building and facilities. This helped pupils to feel that they were valued, and that their education was worthy of investment. However, the building alone would be of little use without the right people, culture and climate.

***What are the main challenges identified for the future?***

Teacher recruitment was mentioned as a challenge, as it is for many schools.

**Case study D: the 'Blackpool Challenge'**

Blackpool is frequently criticised for the performance of its secondary schools. The town is among the most deprived in the UK, with high unemployment and many social problems, such as drug abuse and poor health; its schools encounter low levels of motivation and aspiration among many of their pupils. GCSE outcomes are among the lowest in England: 40 per cent of all pupils, and 27.3 of those eligible for free school meals, achieved the benchmark 'five good GCSEs' standard (see Teach First 2015).

The 'Blackpool Challenge' began in September 2015. It is led by a board of experts, with Professor Sonia Blandford as the independent chair, and represents a collaboration between schools, the local authority, academy trusts in the area, education leaders and the regional schools commissioner, as well as the charity Right to Succeed. Participating schools set the three-year targets which they will aim for over the life of the project. These include improved grades, but can apply to all aspects of school life, such as reducing exclusions, 'soft skill' and personal development outcomes, and pupil destinations.

At its heart is the principle that 'pupil mindsets' and resilience are fundamental to engagement with, and outcomes from, education. Pupils complete a questionnaire to measure levels of 'mental toughness', and this high-quality and timely data is used extensively in planning interventions at school, class and individual levels. 'Mental toughness' is defined as a combination of perceived control (of oneself and one's destiny), commitment, approaches to challenge, and confidence. The links between these factors and educational success are well-evidenced across different national and international contexts, and specific elements of practice associated with the programme are also grounded in research findings (further information can be found in Right to Succeed 2016).

The first application of the mental toughness questionnaire pointed out a number of issues which present obstacles to educational attainment in Blackpool. These include difficulties in tackling challenges, a lack of a sense of control over one's life, and poor levels of commitment. The aim of the challenge is to address these at the individual level, but also



to 'reset' school cultures in various ways. For example, the transition between primary and secondary school may be a time when increased mental toughness is particularly important in helping pupils to set the foundations for success in secondary school and in their later careers.

Local schools have been keen to get involved and buy-in has been high. The headteacher in our study had recognised the elements of the challenge as possible 'keys' to unlocking the potential of his pupils, and to mitigating the impact of social problems and even the reputation of the town on education. Encouraging teachers to get involved and to accept a new way of working and a new 'language' has not been a problem; innovation has been a part of this successful school's history of strong achievement. Other schools, including those with a weaker history of educational outcomes, have been similarly enthusiastic and keen to learn. Cross-school working is already strong.

The strengths of the programme include the opportunity to improve deep understandings of pupils, in particular those from deprived or challenging backgrounds ('to get to know what makes them tick'), and to understand how to unlock their potential. Pilots, with single year groups, are going well, and teachers are looking forward to 'sitting down with students' and getting to grips with the data. Although the Blackpool Challenge is at an early stage, it represents a good opportunity to build on existing strengths, raise aspirations and close educational gaps.

### **4.3 CONCLUSIONS**

The chancellor has pledged to create a 'northern powerhouse' in an attempt to drive economic growth and expand opportunity. This agenda must have education at its heart.

School standards in some areas of the north of England are a cause for concern. The north lags behind London on most measures of educational attainment, especially for disadvantaged pupils, although its results are not dissimilar from other parts of England. There are particularly large attainment gaps in the early years and in the secondary phase. This is a problem that even schools rated good or outstanding have not been able to solve. What's more, this problem is not restricted to the coastal and satellite towns which have received much attention over the last few years – even large cities such as Liverpool, Leeds and Sheffield need to raise their game.

London hasn't always been the beacon of success for disadvantaged pupils. Two decades ago London's schools were some of the worst performing for disadvantaged pupils – yet now they are the best performing in the country. With investment and strong leadership London has shown that success is possible.

Nevertheless, there are also some sources of strength in the northern school system. Primary school results across the north of England are similar to the national average, and some local authorities have levels of attainment that would be the envy of most London boroughs. We have identified 21 secondary schools which can be classified as 'beacons of success' for their ability to achieve good results and narrow attainment gaps despite serving disadvantaged communities. There are also more



nascent attempts to drive improvement which are beginning to show signs of success – from the expansion of Teach First to attract high calibre graduates into teaching in northern towns to the creation of the Blackpool and Liverpool Challenge.

Efforts to put education at the heart of the northern powerhouse must build on these sources of strength, while simultaneously tackling the stubborn underperformance that characterises too many schools in the north of England. Education must become part of the infrastructure of the northern powerhouse to equip young people with the skills and qualifications to drive forward this agenda.

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