

How should schools spend pupil premium funding?

Governors will feel the heat from Ofsted if money for disadvantaged pupils doesn't yield results. They must ensure every penny has an impact

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Pupil premium funding is a precious resource for headteachers in these cash-strapped times. It can be spent at the discretion of the school, but this freedom comes with a crucial condition attached: the attainment of children who attract pupil premium must improve. If not, the governing body will face the ire of Ofsted at the next inspection.

In a recent [white paper](#) (pdf), the government declared that it wanted to improve the effectiveness of the spending, which is allocated to students who claim free school meals. The pressure is now firmly on governors to show that their schools' most vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils are achieving and benefiting from this stream of funding, which can total hundreds of thousands in some schools.

In some settings, this can be a challenge. Marc Rowland, director of the National Education Trust and author of [A practical guide to the pupil premium](#), says governors' understanding of the issues around pupil premium is patchy and often results in ad-hoc spending.

"We shouldn't start with questions about what the money is used for," he says. "We should start by taking a big step back and looking at what is a good strategy for raising attainment."

So where can governors look for guidance? And what are the most constructive questions they can ask senior leaders about how the school plans to raise attainment?

Mind the gap

"As a governor, you first of all need to be really clear about how many children come under the pupil premium," says Gillian Allcroft, deputy chief executive at the National Governors' Association (NGA).

"Know the breakdown by year group and know what the [attainment] gap in your school is. You'll also need to compare that to gap to the gap in similar schools locally and nationally."

At the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), which together with the Sutton Trust published the report [Pupil Premium: Next Steps](#) (pdf), senior analyst James Richardson says governors need to develop their skills in three essential areas: interpreting pupil data, examining the evidence on what interventions have been shown to work and evaluating the results of pupil premium spending in their school.

All schools receive annual data on pupils' progress from the Department for Education, known as [Raise](#), and 85% of schools also pay for detailed information from the Fischer Family Trust, Richardson points out. "This offers projections down to individual pupil level, so you get a really good indication of where the vulnerabilities are likely to be," he says. "Few governors really know how to use this data forensically – although it's actually not that hard – but you can't really decide on a pupil premium strategy unless you understand the data."

Don't lump all students together

"It's a mistake to group all pupil premium pupils together," says Richardson. "Some will be achieving at expected levels, some will be exceeding them, they'll have different strengths and weaknesses. People assume that pupil premium funding is used for interventions such as summer schools, catch-up sessions and one-to-one teaching. But the core of pupil premium should be around the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom."

Governors also need to focus on the children's needs, Rowland observes, not on league tables. "Is pupil premium money being spent to meet disadvantaged students' needs, or is it being focused on helping the school meet its accountability targets?" he asks. "When pupil premium was first introduced, you'd see spikes of spending in years 5 and 6, and in year 10, so it's worth looking to see if money is spent evenly throughout the school."

Think about impact

The EEF has created a [pupil premium toolkit](#) to help schools decide how to spend money. It contains a useful [graphic](#), which maps the cost of interventions against their effectiveness.

It is clear that immediate feedback in the classroom comes top for impact. This strategy is also among the lowest for cost.

"One of the things governors can most usefully ask headteachers is whether the best teachers are working with the most vulnerable," says Rowland.

Spending on extra-curricular activities

Karen Wespieser, a governor at a junior school in Maidenhead, which has relatively high pupil premium numbers, says that promoting cultural and other extra-curricular activities makes a real difference to children. "It's not just about the quality of the teaching – it's about inclusion and equality of access," she says.

At her school, there is a pupil premium lead governor who meets every term with the deputy head, and the curriculum and staffing committee on which Wespieser sits regularly asks detailed questions about the needs, progress and composition of pupil premium cohorts.

"We did have to ask quite specifically for a list of interventions, because there are quite a lot being used - and so understanding what the pupil premium goes towards can be quite complex."

The NGA's Allcroft believes it is entirely valid to use pupil premium money "to extend students' cultural capital with things like theatre or outdoor pursuits". It is, she concedes, difficult to show the immediate impact, "but longer term, it will make a difference. Some things that are important are very hard to measure."

Justifying spending

Some of the most effective uses of pupil premium can be the most subtle, says Rowland. "As a head, you might decide to appoint a candidate who is very experienced and more expensive, for instance." As long as that appointment is made with a focus on the needs of disadvantaged children, this is an appropriate use of the money, he says – and it would be good practice to discuss this strategy with their governing body.

What governors should ask for, suggests Richardson, is the evidence behind particular strategies. Decisions on pupil premium spending should be part of a plan for the entire school, though with a tight focus on the needs of the most vulnerable children. "Pupil premium isn't just a bolt-on," says Richardson, "although because of the separate accountability aspect, people think it is."

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<https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2016/oct/18/how-should-schools-spend-pupil-premium-funding?>