

Tackling disadvantage in education

A toolkit for governing boards

Ethnicity

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NGA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning. Together, we're raising standards and shaping stronger governance to ensure every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.

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NGA would like to thank [Class 13](#) for their support and expertise in the production of this toolkit. Class 13 are an award-winning anti-oppressive charity on a mission to transform the education system. They seek to empower educators to become an active threat to inequality.

They support educators to recognise, reflect and respond to their racial and wider biases so that all children can access an education that promotes free expression, as guaranteed to them by Article 13 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

How to use this toolkit

This toolkit is part of a series aimed at tackling disadvantage in education. It identifies the link between ethnicity and educational disadvantage, signposts resources to help tackle disadvantage, and includes questions for governing boards to explore.

We recommend that you first read our [Widening the lens guidance](#) which explains how to identify key areas of disadvantage in your organisation. [Other toolkits in this series](#) cover **special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), mental health and wellbeing, vulnerability** and **poverty**.

Making the link

Children from minoritised ethnic groups can be discriminated against. This may impact on their attainment, but also school exclusion rates, and mental health and wellbeing. However, not all ethnic groups experience discrimination in the same way, and schools therefore need to consider the effects on different ethnic groups separately.

As with all groups who are marginalised, these issues can be traced back throughout history. In his documentary, *Subnormal: A British Scandal*, Steve McQueen explores the experiences of Black children going back to 1945, who were considered “educationally subnormal” and sent to ‘educational special needs’ (now SEND) provision. In this toolkit, we aim to highlight how racial inequity can still manifest itself in schools today.

Addressing racial inequity in schools doesn’t have to be complicated, but it does require boards, school leaders and staff to be open and willing to facilitate change and reflect on their culture, policies and practice. Governing boards, working together with school leaders, have a crucial role in identifying and addressing racial inequity at all levels of the organisation.

1. What the evidence tells us

Attainment

[The Education Policy Institute’s \(EPI\) analysis](#) of Department for Education (DfE) data identifies significant variation in pupil attainment by ethnic group.

The data highlights Gypsy/Roma pupils as being almost three grades below their White British peers by the end of secondary education, while pupils of Chinese heritage are over two grades above.

Ethnicity	Gap in months (2023)
Gypsy/Roma	30.3
Traveller of Irish Heritage	21.2
White and Black Caribbean	8.0
Black Caribbean	7.5
Any other Black background	2.2
White British	0.0
White and Black African	-1.4
Any other ethnic group	-1.9
Pakistani	-2.2
Any other White background	-3.1
Black African	-4.4
Any other mixed background	-4.8
White Irish	-8.4
Bangladeshi White and Asian	-9.3
Bangladeshi	-9.4
Any other Asian background	-13.0
Indian	-18.6
Chinese	-26.8

Figure 1: Key stage 4 gap in months, relative to White British (EPI, 2024)

Being the largest demographic, White British pupils are used as the comparison group, however, it’s important to note that pupils from this group are one of the lowest performing. Pupils from White British backgrounds also face barriers to learning often linked to socio economic factors, as explored in the 2021 House of Commons Education Select Committee report: “How White working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it”.

This phenomenon is further supported by EPI’s latest data which presents a 22-month attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged White British pupils.

When comparing attainment between non-disadvantaged pupils of all ethnicities, the data presents a similar picture to figure 1, with non-disadvantaged Black Caribbean, Traveller of Irish heritage and Gypsy Roma pupils still being behind their White British peers. Chinese pupils experiencing disadvantage were the only minoritised ethnic group to be ahead of non-disadvantaged White British pupils by a significant margin of 16 months.

The EPI data highlights the importance of considering the barriers to education faced by different ethnic groups individually. Within each ethnic group, there will be significant variation in attainment, influenced by the intersectionality of other barriers, including socio-economic factors and other dimensions of disadvantage discussed in this series of toolkits.

Exclusion

There are longstanding trends whereby exclusion rates vary between pupils with different characteristics. [The Timpson review of school exclusion](#) consolidated much of this and revealed that pupils belonging to certain minoritised ethnic groups (as well as pupils belonging to other pupil groups, such as those with SEND) are more likely to be excluded from school.

In the academic year 2022 to 2023, pupils experiencing the greatest rates of permanent exclusion mirror attainment statistics, with Gypsy/Roma, Irish traveller, and White and Black Caribbean background pupils being the three groups most likely to be permanently excluded from school (3.3, 2.7. and 1.8 times more likely to be excluded than their White British peers, respectively).

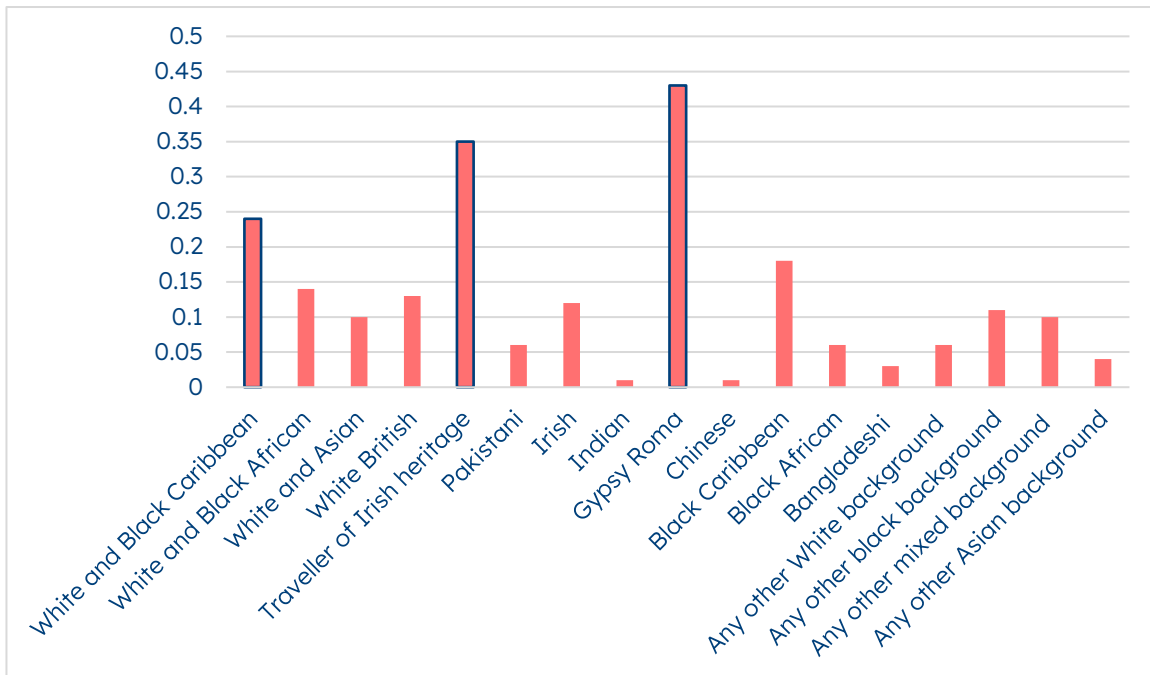


Figure 2: Rates of permanent exclusion per 100 pupils across different ethnic groups in academic year 22-23 (DfE)

Perceptions and barriers to achieving in school

The [Anti-Bullying Alliance](#) found that 86% of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children reported the biggest challenge at school to be bullying, many of whom were not believed when reported. A [briefing of education inequalities](#) facing pupils from the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities produced by Friends, Families & Travellers in 2023 captures the stereotypes associated with these pupils who are often labelled as “trouble-makers” and “unwilling to learn.” The detrimental stereotypes coupled with the challenges they face with bullying leave many Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller pupils feeling isolated from the school community.

Similarly, according to [research carried out by the YMCA](#) in 2020 (figure 3), the biggest barrier for young Black people in education, just above racism, was teacher perceptions. Respondents cited teacher-student interaction as a major aspect of their school experience and many reported being viewed as “less capable”, “unintelligent” and “aggressive”. If perceptions change, this can support teachers to connect the learning with their class.

Teacher perception also encompassed pupils’ physical appearance, with 70% of respondents feeling pressured or required to change their hair to appear more “professional”. This has been a long-standing issue, with uniform policies often stipulating requirements that directly or indirectly discriminate against pupils with afro-textured hair.

The Timpson review of school exclusion found that cases of “cultural misunderstanding” can lead to behaviour being misinterpreted, low expectations of some children, and “labelling of pupils”.

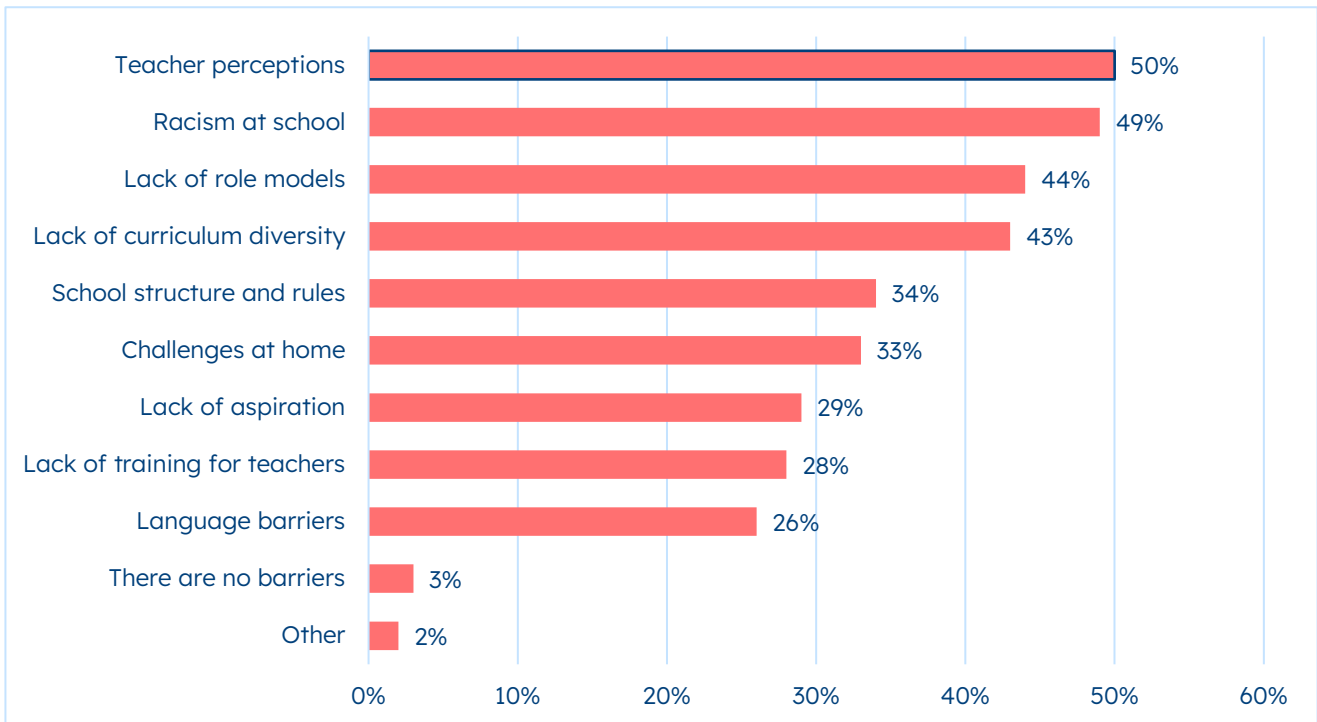


Figure 3: What are the biggest barriers to young Black people achieving in schools? (YMCA)

2. Curriculum diversity

A lack of diversity in the curriculum is considered to be a key barrier to school engagement by several communities. Data from [EduRio's 2023 pupil experience and wellbeing survey](#) reveal that non-White British/Irish pupils are 21% more likely to rarely or never feel that the curriculum reflects people like them.

In Anti-Bullying Alliance research, pupils from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities noted a lack of acknowledgement of their histories and cultures within the school environment. Promoting visibility of people from their communities and celebrating [Gypsy, Roma and Traveller history month](#) were suggested as ways to promote inclusion and reduce bullying.

A lack of diversity in the curriculum was also considered to be a barrier to academic achievement for 43% of young Black pupils according to YMCA research. Case studies indicate that a lack of a sufficiently diverse or decolonised curriculum can mean it is often difficult for Black students in particular to be able to connect content and assessments directly to their own lived realities. This can lead to pupils being disproportionately disadvantaged in their education and having to work harder than their peers to connect with assessment and curriculum content (Campbell, Hawkins and Osman, 2021).

A diverse curriculum should be inclusive of the experiences and histories of minoritised ethnic groups and allow young people to “see and be seen” in the curriculum (Diverse Educators). Diversity should not be an add-on to the current offer, but rather embedded and woven throughout. When mapping out the curriculum offer, it is important for schools to include writers and resources from ethnically minoritised backgrounds (and other under-represented groups).

Questions to explore:

- What could you individually, or collectively, do to get to know your school community better?
- Does your curriculum offer represent the lives, histories and experiences not only of the community you serve, but also wider society?
- How is knowledge and understanding of equality and diversity built into the curriculum?
- How do assemblies, classroom discussions, pastoral activities and visits promote equality and diversity?
- Do school leaders and staff fully engage and consider the needs of ethnically diverse pupils when designing and delivering lessons such as PE and school sport? (For example, sports kit, activities, groupings, timing of enrichment/extra curricular activities, cultural celebrations/religious festivals.)
- Does our extra-curricular provision account for the interests of different cultural groups in the school community?

Relevant resources

- Class 13's unique work focuses on [deficit thinking](#), which is a key factor of negative teacher perceptions of young people.
- The Chartered College of Teaching offer an [online course on decolonising and diversifying the curriculum](#), covering the following modules:
 1. Defining colonisation
 2. Knowing our histories
 3. Why decolonise and diversify the curriculum
 4. Approaches to decolonising and diversifying the curriculum
 5. Belonging in literature
 6. Conversations about race
- Youth Sport Trust (YST) has produced the [Inclusive Health Check](#), a self-review tool to help identify areas to build upon your school's inclusive opportunities which aims to provide you with research, resources and tips to help enhance school sport provision.
- [Diverse Educators have produced a toolkit](#) on diversifying your curriculum with resources on how to begin the process and where to get support.
- The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families has published an [instructional case study](#) from a school who set up a working group to diversify their curriculum.
- Optimus Education has published a [series of blogs](#), including representation in the curriculum: culture, diversity and inclusion which includes useful links to resources.

Deficit thinking refers to the idea that pupils from various 'at risk' groups fail in school due to their internal deficiencies. This could be due to a number of different factors: home life, social and economic status, gender and race.

3. Staffing and ethnic diversity

The representation of those from minoritised ethnic backgrounds in the teacher workforce was also considered a barrier to attainment, with 44% in the YMCA study raising the lack of role models. Despite gradual increases in representation over the last decade, only 16.2% of teachers are from a minoritised ethnic background compared to 37% of the pupil population in England (DfE, 2023).

[NFER 2024 research](#) demonstrates an underrepresentation of people belonging to minoritised ethnic groups across all levels of teaching, from initial teacher training to headship. The underrepresentation becomes more pronounced with seniority, with only 3.6% of headteachers in England being people of colour.

It is important for governing boards and school leaders to consider how representative their workforce is of the school population and to be conscious of this in their recruitment and selection process. Schools should work to create an inclusive environment for staff from minoritised ethnic backgrounds.

Ensuring the staff workforce is representative of the communities they serve has an impact on many children and young people achieving their full potential.

Questions to explore:

- Does the school have a workforce that represents the diversity of the local community?
- How do you monitor diversity within the workforce?
- Do all staff feel they are treated fairly? How do we know that this is the case?
- How do our values and culture serve to protect people from being discriminated against?

4. Staff development

Increasing representation of the workforce is important to create an inclusive environment for all pupils, but in their report, [Race and Racism in Secondary Schools](#), Runnymede found it to be incomplete without increasing the ‘racial literacy’ of all teachers and school leaders. The report states that, by their own admission, many teachers are ill-prepared to teach in ways that promote anti-racism, and this can include teachers from minoritised ethnic backgrounds.

Addressing the issue of racism and bias is not down to those from minoritised backgrounds but is everyone’s responsibility.

Racial literacy means having the **knowledge, skills, awareness and dispositions** to talk about race and racism. Staff growth and development is essential to improve practice.

Questions to explore:

- How confident are school staff to talk about race and racism; does this need to be addressed with CPD?
- Have staff undertaken unconscious bias training?
- Does the CPD available to teachers ensure the required skills and knowledge are in place to support effective delivery of a diverse curriculum?
- Have Black, Asian and other ethnically minoritised members of staff been encouraged to undertake leadership development?
- Are Black, Asian and other ethnically minoritised members of staff aware of the range of specific networking, support, coaching and development programmes available to them?

Relevant resources

Class 13 is the Fair Education Alliance 2021 Innovation Award winner. They offer [courses for school staff](#) to recognise, reflect and respond to their racial and wider biases.

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and families has a collection of resources:

- [Micro-aggressions: staff meeting presentation and guidance](#)
- [Improving staff knowledge and confidence around anti-racism](#)
- [Teaching curriculum topics linked to racism and handling racist world events](#)

5. Developing inclusive policies

Ensuring that you have clear and unambiguous school policies in relation to equality and diversity is an important part of creating an inclusive environment for all pupils. Senior leaders and their boards should consider how their policies address not only incidents of overt racism, but also practices that could exclude pupils and staff from minoritised ethnic backgrounds. This means ensuring data acquired on a range of areas such as suspension/exclusion and attendance is broken down by different characteristics including ethnicity.

Questions to explore:

- Are data on racist incidents reported to the board?
- How are racist incidents dealt with?
- Does our data on behaviour sanctions, up to and including exclusions, indicate any bias towards pupils with particular ethnicities?
- Is our uniform and appearance policy inclusive of all pupils from all backgrounds?

Relevant resources

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families has produced the following resources for those responsible for writing and reviewing policies:

- [Reviewing existing policies with an anti-racist lens](#)
- [Anti-racism policy template](#)
- The Equality Human Rights Commission has produced [resources for governing boards and school leaders](#) to help prevent hair discrimination.
- The Runnymede trust report: [Race and Racism in Secondary Schools](#)



6. Stakeholder engagement

It's important for boards and schools to reach all parents and work to remove barriers, such as where English is not the first language, or where there may be cultural differences. Some parents may be persuaded to act as language ambassadors to relay views and any concerns to boards or staff.

Schools can work with their local communities to draw on specialist knowledge, skills and resources in mutually beneficial ways and to respond to a wide range of parents' and children's educational, social, health and wellbeing needs. Engaging with local leaders from community centres and places of worship is particularly effective in remaining attuned to the, sometimes changing, needs of pupils at your school and allows you to approach cultural differences with nuance and understanding.

Questions to explore:

- Do boards know whether parents from minoritised ethnic backgrounds are facing relational or communication barriers with their child's school/trust?
- Is the school/trust being proactive in wider community engagement?
- How might the curriculum and wider school sport offer be used to engage stakeholders? For example, the use of PE and sport (including sporting events) in bringing your school community (including parents) together to increase knowledge and understanding about different cultures and foster good relations across all protected characteristics. (Public Sector Equality Duty).

Relevant resources

- [Joint guidance from NGA and Parentkind](#) explains why parent participation in pupils' learning is important, actions schools and trusts can take, and how boards monitor and support effective parental engagement.
- Parentkind has produced a [blueprint for parent-friendly schools](#) which discusses ways in which schools can engage effectively with parents and communities from diverse backgrounds.

7. Governance and ethnic diversity

NGA's [Increasing participation in school and trust governance report](#) highlights the impact the decisions made by the board have on pupils, parents/carers and staff. It is important that boards understand the experiences of the community they serve and offer a healthy difference of perspectives.

However, many governing boards are not representative of their communities. Of those that disclosed, in NGA's 2024 annual governance survey, only 5% of respondents were Black, Asian or from other ethnically minoritised backgrounds, in comparison to 19% of the general population. We talk more about the [issue of representation in our blog](#).

NGA has resources to support boards to increase diversity and participation from under-represented groups, and has for several years campaigned to increase the number of volunteers from ethnically minoritised groups, for example through our [Everyone on Board campaign](#).

NGA also works with other national organisations to improve equality, diversity, representation and inclusion across the education sector and has [made commitments to continue to do so](#).

Relevant resources

- NGA's guidance, [The right people around the table](#) provides practical advice to help ensure that your board has the right blend of knowledge, skills, perspectives and backgrounds to govern effectively.
- [NGA's diversity indicators form](#) for governing boards is designed to gather diversity data on their membership and use this as a basis for discussion and action.

All of NGA's resources relating to equality, diversity and inclusion [can be found here](#).

Governance and school/trust culture

As those that set the culture, ethos and vision of a school, it is important that governing boards take a leading role in promoting equality, diversity and inclusion. NGA has collated [a range of tools](#) to help boards evaluate the effectiveness of their strategies, including [our equality and diversity guidance](#) which covers the legal duties that boards have as well as how to achieve a culture that champions equality and inclusion.

Creating an inclusive culture: e-learning

NGA has worked in partnership with the Association of School and College Leaders to develop a [programme of e-learning](#) focusing on creating an inclusive culture and going beyond compliance by giving users the knowledge, understanding and tools to do so