EDUCATION POLICY INSTITUTE

# School attendance and lost schooling across England since full reopening

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# Introduction

Pupils across England have now returned to school on a full-time basis for nearly a whole term. Getting as many pupils back to school full-time is crucial to allow them to catch-up with any losses in learning over the period of lockdown. However, there have been numerous challenges and barriers to getting attendance rates back to normal. This includes rising infection rates since September and parental confidence in safety measures.

Pupils absent from school will be missing out on significant learning time. This has particularly strong implications for pupils in exam years, who are more likely to be absent from school through being older. Coming on top of variable losses in learning time during lockdown, continuing COVID-related absences will make it incredibly hard to implement a fair exam process in 2021.

In this short report, we analyse data published today by the Department for Education showing attendance rates by local authority for this term, as well as estimates by the Children's Commissioner for England on the number of days of lost learning by local authority.

## Variation in attendance and lost schooling by local authority

Figure 1 shows the average levels of attendance over the autumn term by local authority for primary and secondary schools.

Attendance rates have been much higher in primary schools, with most areas seeing over 90 per cent attendance levels, close to the pre-pandemic average of over 95 per cent. However, some specific areas have seen lower attendance levels of 80 to 85 per cent. This includes parts of Birmingham (such as Sandwell and Dudley), parts of Greater Manchester (such as Rochdale and Oldham) and parts of East London (such as Newham and Tower Hamlets).

Attendance levels in secondary schools have been much lower and much more varied across England. For the most part, attendance has been 80 to 90 per cent, well below the pre-pandemic level of 95 per cent. However, there are also large swathes of the country where attendance has averaged 75 to 80 per cent, such as much of the North West, Yorkshire, and cities across the Midlands and North East. In some specific areas, attendance has been even lower. For example, it has been 71 per cent in Rochdale, and 72 per cent in both Sandwell and Oldham.

The Children's Commissioner's Office uses these figures to estimate the average number of days of lost (face-to-face) schooling by local authority, after accounting for average pre-pandemic levels of absence by local authority. These estimates by area are illustrated in Figure 2.

On average, primary school children in England have lost 3.5 days of schooling over the autumn term relative to pre-pandemic levels. Only a small number of local authorities have seen primary school children lose more than 6 days of schooling, on average. This includes parts of Birmingham and Manchester with relatively low primary school attendance levels.

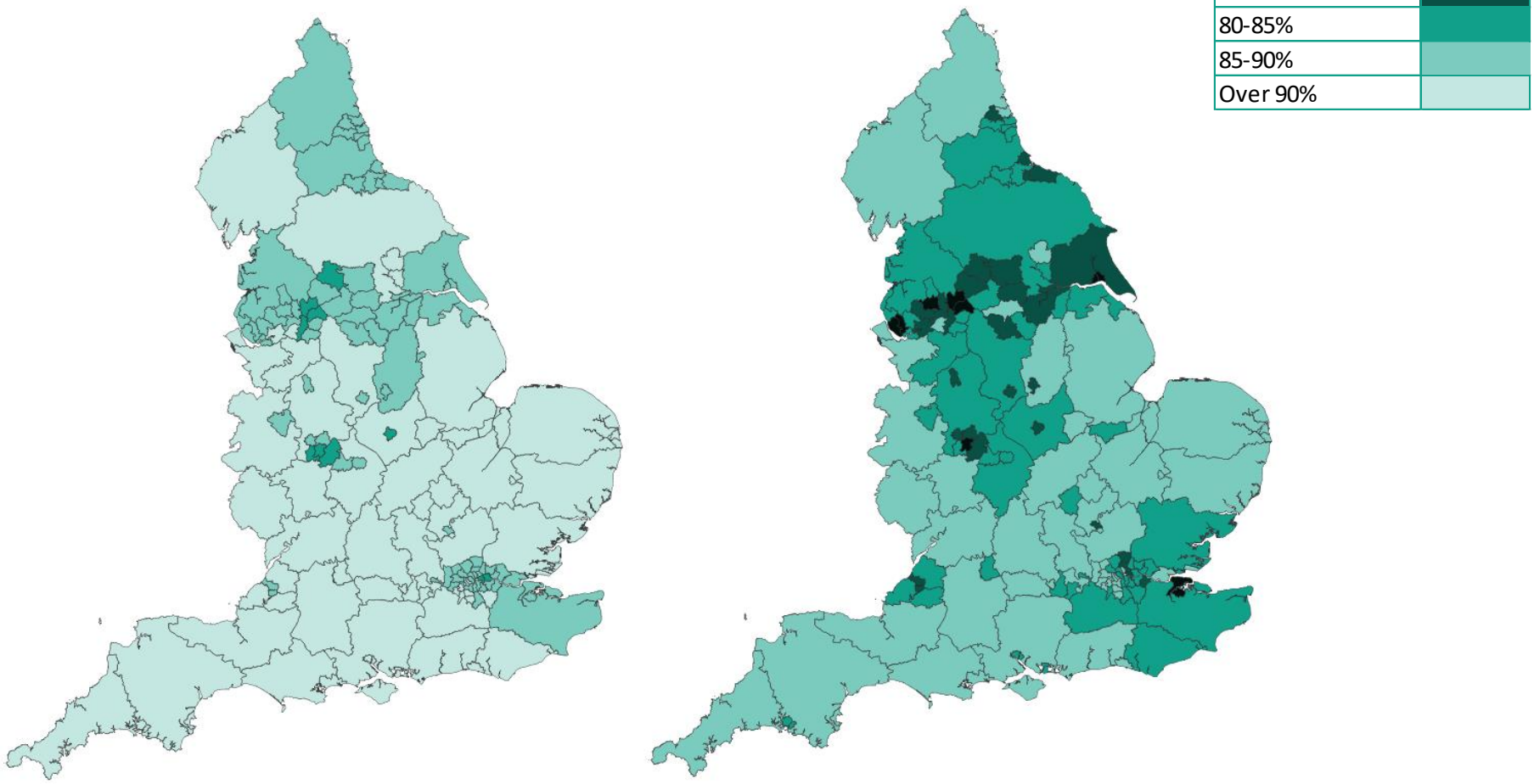
Secondary school children have lost about 6.3 days of face-to-face schooling, on average. However, there are many cases where pupils have lost more than 10 days, on average. This includes Rochdale, Oldham and Sandwell, where pupils have lost about 13 days on average over the autumn term. In sharp contrast, pupils in many rural local authorities have lost less than 4 days relative to pre-pandemic levels.

These differences across areas are significant. However, even these are likely to be under-estimates of the true variation across and within schools. Some school and year groups will have seen a close to normal term of attendance, whilst others could have missed long periods due to multiple self-isolation episodes.

## Figure 1: Average attendance rates over autumn term by local authority

### a) Primary Schools

### b) Secondary Schools

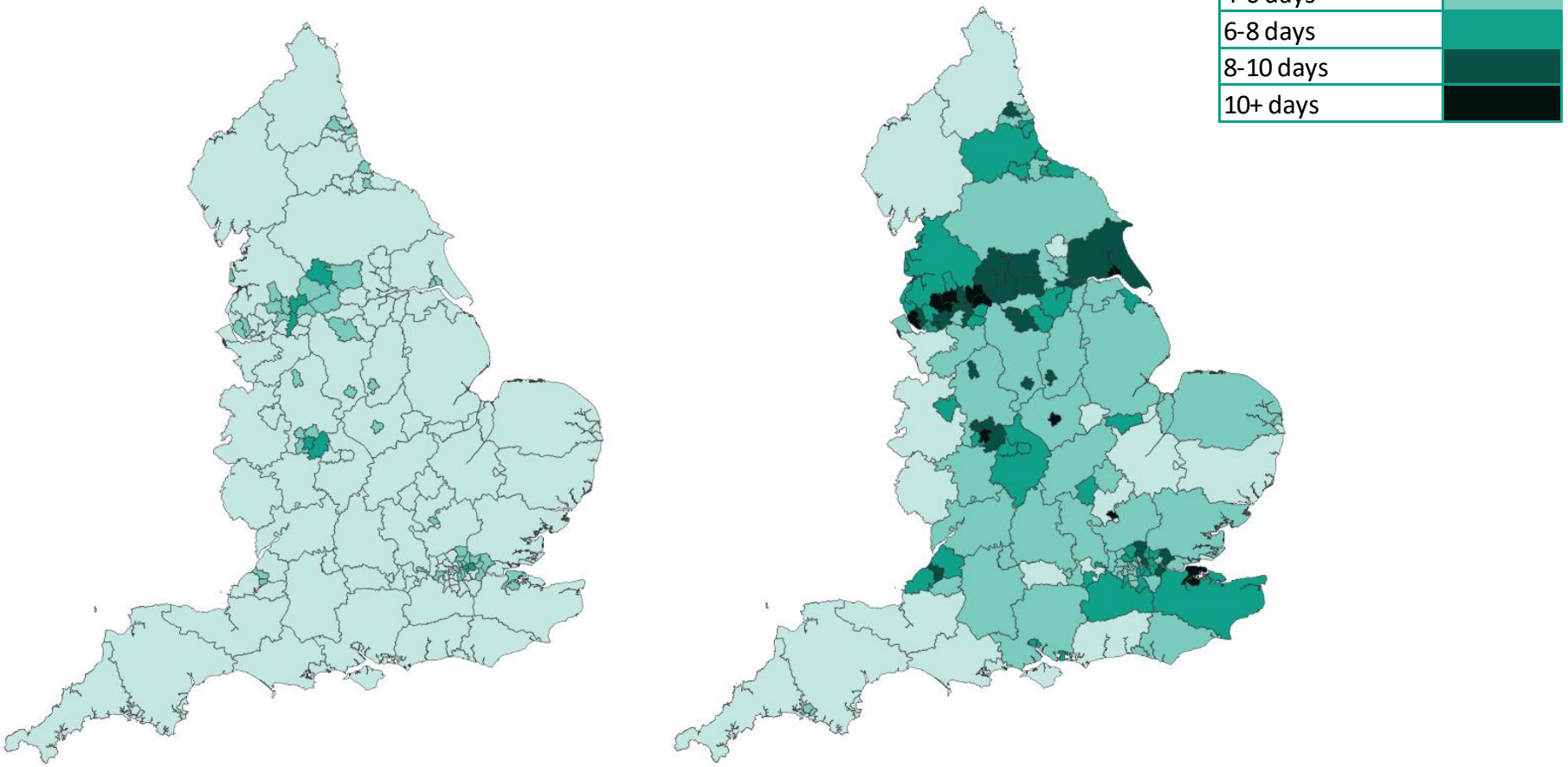



***Notes and sources for England:*** *Covers all pupils in state-funded primary and secondary schools (except maintained nurseries); Children's Commissioner for England (https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/school-attendance-since-september/)*

## Figure 2: Average days of lost face-to-face schooling over autumn term by local authority

### a) Primary Schools

### b) Secondary Schools




***Notes and sources for England:*** *Covers all pupils in state-funded primary and secondary schools (except maintained nurseries); Children's Commissioner for England (https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/school-attendance-since-september/)*

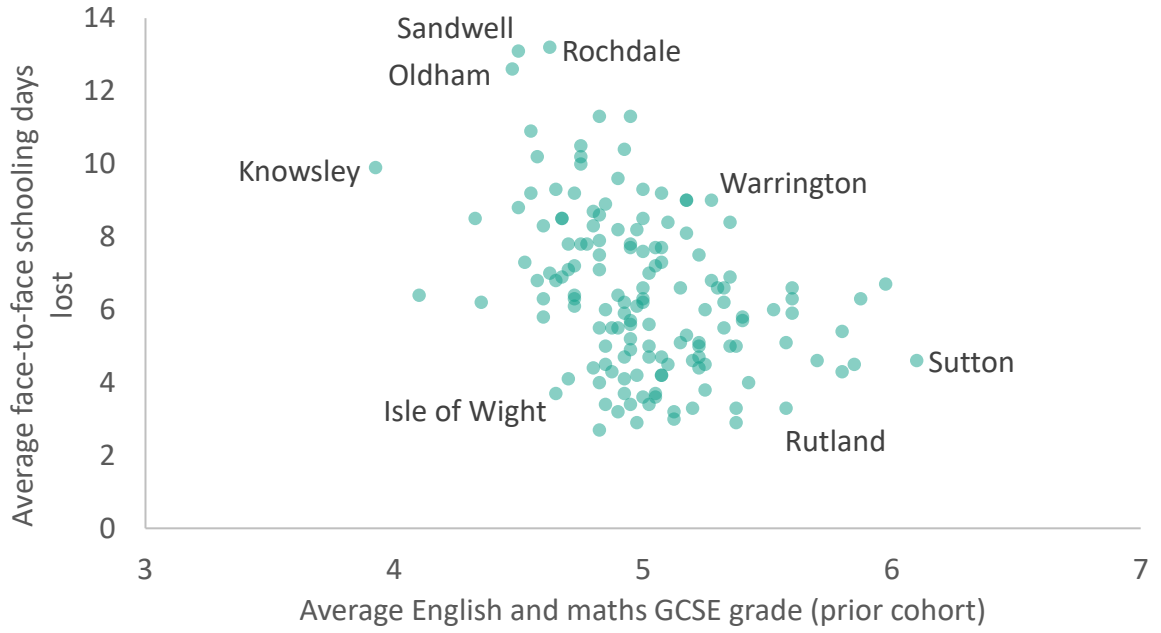
## Differences by area and pupil characteristics

As shown by the Children's Commissioner's report, these differences in attendance by area clearly correlate with differences in infection rates, as one would expect.[1] Here, we complement this analysis by showing how school attendance levels correlate with other area-characteristics, such as levels of disadvantaged and past GCSE results.

Broadly speaking, areas with lower prior GCSE results have seen more days of lost schooling relative to pre-pandemic levels, such as Knowlsey, Oldham, Rochdale and Sandwell, where pupils have lost around 10 or more days of face-to-face schooling over the autumn term. However, there are some areas with similar low prior GCSE results where pupils have lost less than 4 days of schooling, such as the Isle of Wight.

Areas experiencing higher levels of disadvantage have also seen greater days of lost schooling per pupil, both amongst primary and secondary schools. Again, this relationship is far from perfect. For example, the share of pupils eligible for free school meals is similar across Islington and Knowsley, but secondary school pupils in Islington have only lost about 4 days of face-to-face schooling on average, compared with 10 days in Knowsley.

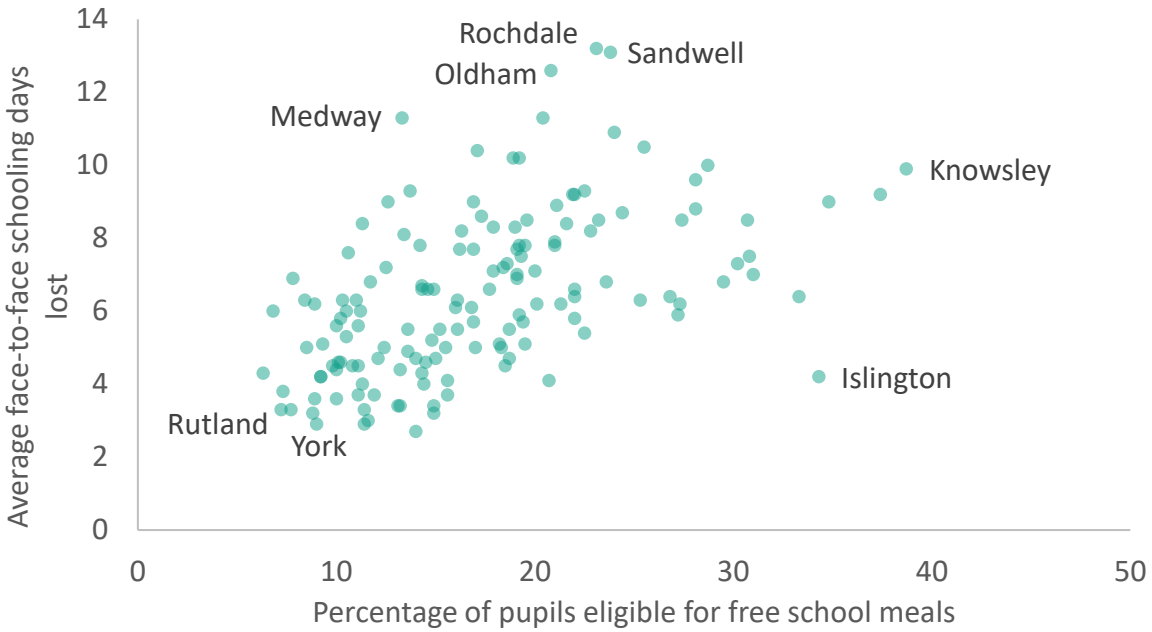
## Figure 3: Missed classroom learning days over autumn term and prior GCSE results, by local authority: Secondary schools



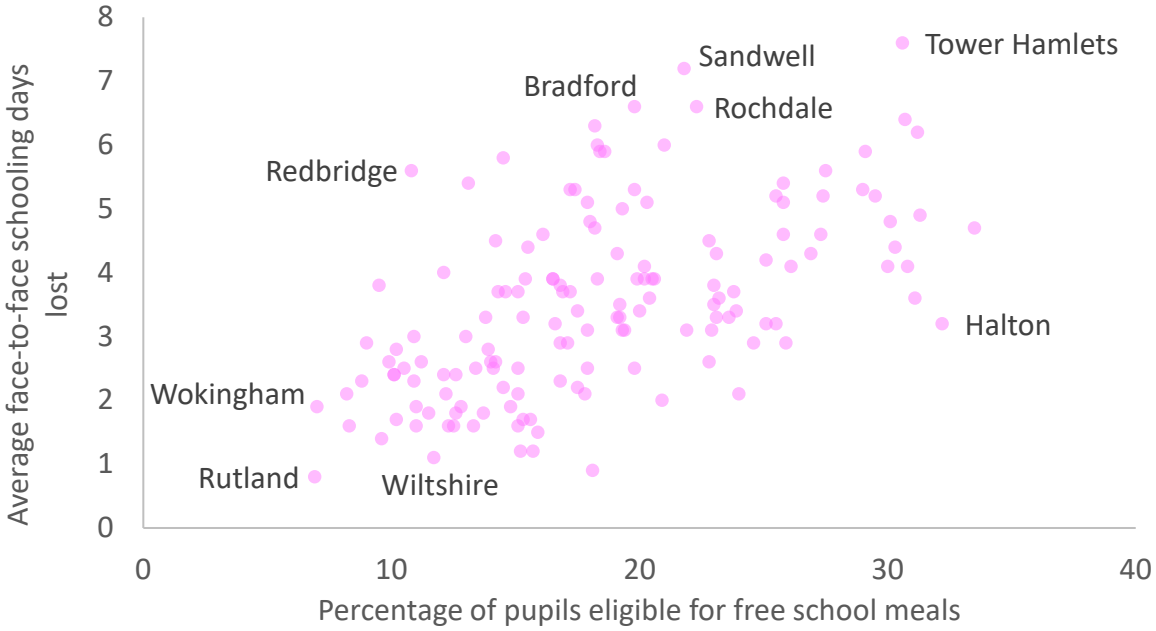

*Notes and sources for England: Covers all pupils in state-funded primary and secondary schools (except maintained nurseries); Children's Commissioner for England (https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/school-attendance-since-september/); Key stage 4 performance (revised): Academic Year 2019/20 (https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance-revised/2019-20)*

[1] https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/school-attendance-since-september/

## Figure 4: Missed classroom learning days over autumn term and disadvantage levels, by local authority: Secondary schools




## Figure 5: Missed classroom learning days over autumn term and disadvantage levels, by local authority: Primary schools




*Notes and sources for England: Covers all pupils in state-funded primary and secondary schools (except maintained nurseries); Children's Commissioner for England (https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/school-attendance-since-september/); Pupils, Schools and their Characteristics: January 2020 (https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics)*

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

Even before the start of the autumn term, pupils across England had already lost considerable amounts of learning time. All the evidence suggests this will have the greatest impact on disadvantaged pupils, given they tend to benefit more from school and often lack the resources required for effective remote learning.[2]

Since reopening in September, many pupils have also missed out on face-to-face learning time due to rising infection rates. Certain areas have lost considerably more than others. For example, secondary school pupils in Sandwell, Oldham and Rochdale have lost about 13 days of face-to-face schooling over the autumn term. Looking across areas, it also tends to be schools in more disadvantaged areas and those with low past GCSE results that have seen the lowest attendance levels and most days of lost schooling. As a result, inequalities in education are likely to have widened over this term.

The relationship with disadvantage and past GCSE results is far from perfect, however. Much of the variation is idiosyncratic across individual areas, reflecting the uneven spread of the virus. The differences across areas will also understate the true differences across individual pupils as there will have been big differences across and within schools too. As a result, inequalities in education are likely to have widened in a complicated way, and in ways that is hard to predict based on broad individual or area-level characteristics.

This will make it hard to implement exams in 2021 without some widening of educational inequalities, even with the delay and advanced notice of content for summer 2021. There is also a very clear risk that inequalities could widen significantly too. We don't yet have a clear picture of the losses in schooling for individual pupils, the impact this has had on their learning or how this will be reflected on exam day. There is also no precedent for the current situation. The complicated picture for losses in learning time will also make it hard to adjust exam results for such losses. Broad adjustments based on area or individual characteristics could miss much of the variation.

This leads to a number of clear implications for data and policy.

First, this data on attendance by local authority is incredibly important for understanding the scale and nature of the challenge facing schools and policymakers. It is therefore welcome that the Department for Education has committed to publishing this each week from January 2021, just like as Scotland and Wales have done since September. This will ensure that policy and debate is informed by the latest detailed evidence on what is actually happening around the country.

Second, existing data collection should be expanded. The Department for Education should collect and publish data by year group, or even just for years 11 and 13. We know very little about the attendance of these key year groups in England. From data for Scotland and Wales, we know that year 11 or equivalent year groups, unfortunately, have seen the lowest attendance levels within secondary schools. Without similar data for England, it is extremely hard to predict how attendance levels could affect exams in 2021. Schools would understand the merits of this extra data collection and many will already have collected data in this format.

[2] Cunha, F., Heckman, J. J. and Schennach, S. M. (2010), 'Estimating the technology of cognitive and noncognitive skill formation', Econometrica, 78, 883–931, https://doi.org/10.3982/ECTA6551. Jackson, C. K., Johnson, R. C. and Persico, C. (2016), 'The effects of school spending on educational and economic outcomes: evidence from school finance reforms', Quarterly Journal of Economics, 131, 157– 218, https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjv036; Cottell, J. and Sibieta, L. (2020), 'Education policy responses across the UK to the pandemic,' (https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-responses-uk-pandemic/)

Lastly, more catch-up resources are required to help pupils catch-up on lost learning time before educational inequalities become deep-seated. Extra resources should be targeted at more disadvantaged pupils and those who have lost large amounts of face-to-face schooling.