

Poor children's life chances are decided in primary school

Randeep Ramesh, social affairs editor
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More than four-fifths of children from low-income families who have fallen behind by the age of seven will fail to achieve five good GCSEs including English and maths – a glaring inequality that highlights the extent to which poor children's life chances are determined in primary school, a leading charity says.

In a report looking at the most recent government figures, Save the Children argues that the ability to read, write and calculate at such a young age influences a child's future earnings and health, and in economic terms the problem costs the country billions in lost revenue. The charity is calling for the pupil premium – primary school funding targeted at the poorest children – to be tripled.

By the time they are seven, nearly 80% of the difference in GCSE results between rich and poor children has already been determined. Save the Children says the first two years a child is at school are a crucial window during which to close the attainment gap – but, despite SATs tests at age seven, most of the education system is geared towards assessing attainment at age 11 or the end of secondary school.

If the trends seen between 2007 and 2012 continue, around half a million children risk not reading properly by the age of seven by 2020, the report said.

The recession too will blight the poor's chances disproportionately. The charity found that the economic crisis had put extra pressure on parents' ability to support their children's learning with a quarter of all parents saying they had less money than they did five years ago, meaning they could not afford to pay for school trips and other activities.

To right this imbalance the charity argues that the government should target the poor explicitly by raising the pupil premium from this year's £900 per child to £4,000 by 2020. More cash could be found by looking at the current split between primary and secondary schools. At present primary school per-pupil expenditure is only around three-quarters of per-pupil funding for secondary schools.

Save the Children's chief executive, Justin Forsyth, said: "Many children starting school this term already have the odds stacked against them. These children of the recession, born during the global financial crisis into a world of slow growth, stagnant wages and increasing living costs, where communities are feeling the effects of austerity, need our help more than ever. The cost of failing is a young child without a fair chance in life however hard they try."

The charity said there must be more focus and investment on five- to seven-year-olds, not just because of the individual tragedy of wasted lives, but because failing to help the poorest primary-age children catch up at school could cost the UK economy £30bn in untapped potential by 2030, slowing the country's recovery from recession and preventing it from being a global leader.

A spokesperson for the Department for Education said: "It is utterly unacceptable that so many disadvantaged children leave primary school without a firm grounding in the basics of reading, writing and maths and that is why we are urgently reforming primary education and giving specific support to disadvantaged pupils. We are increasing the pupil premium to £2.5bn a year and doubling the number of disadvantaged two-year-olds eligible for free nursery places."