

# Closing the attainment gap: key lessons learned in the EEF's first six years

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- 1. Early Years education has huge promise in preventing the attainment gap becoming entrenched before children start school.**  
However, it has not – yet – yielded as much as it should. Professional support and training for early years workers is key. Areas with potential include communication and language approaches; self-regulation strategies; and parental involvement.
- 2. What happens in the classroom makes the biggest difference:** improving teaching quality generally leads to greater improvements at lower cost than structural changes. There is particularly good evidence around the potential impact of teacher professional development; but the supply of high-quality training is limited.
- 3. Targeted small group and one-to-one interventions have the potential for the largest immediate impact on attainment.** Some whole-class and whole-school interventions have shown promise but may take longer to show results.
- 4. The transition between phases of education – notably early years to primary, and primary to secondary – is a risk-point for vulnerable learners.** Schools need to diagnose pupils' needs as soon as possible in order to put in place effective support to help those falling behind to catch up.
- 5. The challenge of improving post-16 attainment is a particular issue for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.** A majority of students eligible for free school meals have not achieved a good standard in English and mathematics by age 19. More evidence is needed to identify the best ways to improve outcomes for these learners.
- 6. Pupil Premium funding is a valuable focus to support senior leaders in raising the attainment of disadvantaged young people.** But it is vital that schools (as well as early years and post-16 settings) consider how *all* their resources can be used to achieve this goal. Good teaching for all pupils has a particular benefit for disadvantaged pupils.
- 7. There is a strong appetite for educators to engage with and use evidence.** Up to two-thirds of senior leaders use our Teaching and Learning Toolkit to make decisions, while more than 10,000 schools in England have signed up to take part in one of the EEF's trials so far.
- 8. Robust and independent evaluation of high-potential programmes is not only possible, but essential.** Evidence is a crucial tool to inform senior leaders' decision-making and help them identify 'best bets' for spending. Time and money is too scarce to stick with approaches and programmes which do not make a real difference. The effective use of evidence means strategically abandoning ineffective approaches, as well as implementing new ones with positive evidence behind them.
- 9. We know enough in key areas of teaching and learning to start making a positive difference now.** While generating new evidence remains essential, in areas such as literacy there is no excuse for not deploying the existing, extensive evidence to support teaching practice – as we are doing, for example, through our £10 million campaign to boost the literacy of primary-age pupils in the North East. Our growing bank of EEF guidance reports gives teachers the best available evidence in a range of key areas.
- 10. The £5 billion per year asset of teaching assistants can be deployed more effectively.** Though previous research had suggested that teaching assistants can have a negative impact on children's learning, EEF trials have shown how, when properly trained and supported, teaching assistants working in structured ways with small groups can boost pupils' progress.
- 11. How a project is implemented is vital and arguably as important as its content.** Successful projects have clarity around their structure, objectives and target group, with high-quality training and materials that allow for adaptation and strong implementation. The EEF's forthcoming guidance report, *A School's Guide to Implementation*, draws out what we have learnt over the last six years.
- 12. Most programmes are no better than what schools are already doing:** around 1-in-4 EEF trials show enough promise for us to re-invest in. Teachers and decision-makers are right to be discerning about where they spend their limited funds.

13. **Catch up is difficult: we should aim to get it right first time round for all children.** The EEF evaluated over 20 catch-up programmes that aimed to support struggling readers at the transition from primary to secondary school. Though some were shown to be effective in boosting attainment, no single programme delivered enough to close the gap.
14. **Essential life skills (or 'character') are important in determining life chances and can be measured in a robust and comparable way.** Much less is known, however, about how these skills can be developed and whether they lead to increased academic attainment. This is a major focus of work for the EEF.
15. **Sharing effective practice between schools – and building capacity and effective mechanisms for doing so – is key to closing the gap.** Teachers and school leaders now have access to a significant and growing body of academic research with enormous potential to improve pupil attainment and save schools money. But we know that research on its own is not enough; applying the findings to the classroom is a real challenge. We believe no-one is better-placed to support schools in doing this than teachers themselves.