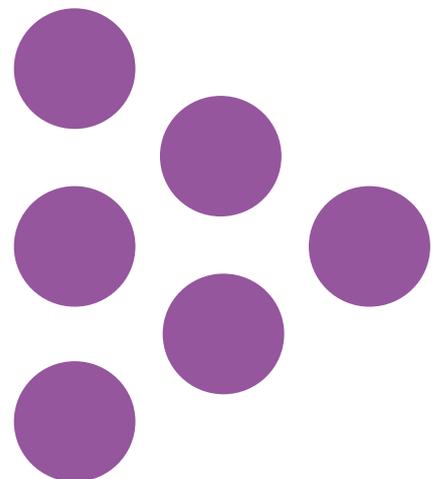

Briefing report

Selective Comprehensives 2026

The social composition of top comprehensive schools

National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)



Selective Comprehensives 2026

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Acknowledgements

NFER was commissioned by the Sutton Trust to update our previous work on Selective Comprehensives and produce an independent briefing report of our findings. These findings are reported in this document. Alongside this, the Sutton Trust has produced its own summary report drawing out highlights from our report and setting out their recommendations.

This work contains statistical data from ONS which is Crown Copyright. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates. The analysis was carried out in the Secure Research Service, part of the Office for National Statistics.

Defining Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

There are two levels of support currently used to target pupils with SEND in schools:

- SEN Support generally describes a lower level of support that can be provided by teachers or teaching assistants. This is largely funded through a school's existing budget, albeit some local authorities (LAs) provide additional funding for pupils on SEN Support.
- Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are support plans put in place by the LA for pupils requiring a higher level of support. EHCPs are legally binding documents outlining a pupil's needs and the support that must be provided.

SEN coordinators (SENCOs) in schools decide on SEN Support, while EHCPs are issued by LAs following applications from schools or parents. While schools must cover the first £6,000 needed to support any pupil with SEND, the remaining cost of the provision specified in an EHCP must be met by the LA.

Defining the top 500 comprehensive secondary schools

The 'top 500 comprehensive schools' are defined throughout this report using the following three measures of school-level attainment:

- Progress 8 – this is the main school accountability measure used by government. This is the average of each pupil's Progress 8 score for all eligible Year 11 pupils at the school. A Progress 8 score compares a pupil's Attainment 8 score to all other pupils nationally who had similar Key Stage 2 results at the end of primary school.
- Attainment 8 – A pupil's Attainment 8 score is the sum of eight different Key Stage 4 qualifications. This includes mathematics, English, three qualifications from EBacc subjects and three other qualifications. Attainment 8 at school level is the average of each pupil's Attainment 8 score for all eligible Year 11 pupils at the school.
- Percentage of pupils achieving grade four or above in English and Maths GCSE

All schools in scope were ranked according to their scores on each of the attainment measures from the 2023/24 academic year and the top 500 schools form the group of interest for each measure.

Key findings

This briefing report, commissioned by the Sutton Trust, provides an update on social selectivity in England's top performing comprehensive schools drawing on GCSE data up to 2023/24. It builds on the Selective Comprehensives 2024 report, which used 2021/22 attainment data.

The main aim of the report is to assess whether top performing comprehensives are representative of their local areas in terms of the socio-economic background of their pupils. This report is the first Selective Comprehensives report to also consider whether there is social selection in special educational needs and disability (SEND) representation (as measured by a pupil having an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and/or SEN Support) across top comprehensive schools. This is alongside exploring the wider overlap between pupil outcomes, disadvantage and SEND representation in England's schools. Where there are differences between a school's intake and its catchment area, these may be due to a range of factors. Whilst it is not possible to unequivocally attribute any differences observed to one factor, highlighting any gaps which may exist is a first step towards explaining and addressing them.

Our analysis relies on the numbers of pupils identified as having an EHCP and/or SEN Support in Department for Education (DfE) data. These need to be interpreted with caution: SEN Support identification practices vary across schools, and local differences in how pupils are supported, assessed, and issued with EHCPs can influence who receives one.

Representation of the 500 comprehensive secondary schools

By disadvantage

- The 500 top performing comprehensives in England continue to have lower rates of pupils who are eligible for free school meals (FSM) in their intakes compared to all schools nationally and their catchment areas.
- Among the top 500 comprehensive schools for Progress 8, the headline accountability measure for schools in England, there is a gap of -5.1 percentage points between the average percentage of FSM pupils in each school and their catchment area. This gap is even larger among top comprehensive schools ranking highly based on Attainment 8 or percentage of pupils achieving grade four or above in English and Maths GCSE at -6.3 and -6.1 percentage points, respectively.
- As compared to the top 500 comprehensive schools in 2021/22, these gaps appear to have widened slightly (at -4.3 percentage points for Progress 8 in 2021/22, -5.8 percentage points for Attainment 8 and -5.6 percentage points for the percentage of pupils achieving grade four or above in GCSE English and Maths).

By SEND

- EHCP rates are largely comparable between top comprehensive schools and all secondary schools. They are also similar between top comprehensives and their catchment areas. This suggests that pupils with EHCPs are no less likely to attend a top performing school.
- However, EHCP representation in top comprehensive schools differs by pupil disadvantage. Our analysis suggests that top performing comprehensive schools, as

compared to their catchments and all comprehensives, have a slight over-representation in non-disadvantaged pupils with EHCPs but under-representation in disadvantaged pupils with EHCPs. This finding reflects wider inequalities in access to EHCPs by socioeconomic background, with research having shown that disadvantaged pupils face greater barriers in accessing EHCPs (The Sutton Trust, 2025).

- In addition, there are greater differences between top performing comprehensives and all secondary schools when it comes to SEN Support. While an average secondary school has more pupils in receipt of SEN Support than its catchment (with a gap of 0.4), the top 500 performing comprehensives have on average at least one percentage point fewer pupils with SEN Support compared to their catchment (at -1.2 percentage points for the top 500 performing schools based on Progress 8, -1.6 for Attainment 8 and -1.7 for the percentage of pupils achieving grade four or above in GCSE English and Maths).
- Differences in the rates of pupils with SEN Support across schools may be due to a range of factors, including definition and identification practices. While one explanation for this finding may be that top performing schools are less likely to have high levels of pupils with SEN needs, another explanation could be that top performing comprehensive schools are better at meeting pupil needs through their day-to-day provision. More research is needed to better understand the drivers of this pattern.
- Top comprehensive schools with a negative disadvantage ‘gap’, such that they have a lower share of FSM pupils than their catchments, also tend to have a negative SEND Support ‘gap’. This is not altogether surprising as there is a significant overlap between pupil disadvantage and SEN identification. In 2024/25, while 26 per cent of all pupils in state-funded schools were eligible for FSM, this rate was 38 per cent among pupils with identified SEN Support needs and 42 among pupils with an EHCP. As outlined above, given that disadvantaged pupils may face greater barriers in accessing EHCPs, if anything, these figures are likely to underestimate this overlap.

Broader overlap between FSM, SEND and pupil outcomes

- On average, pupils who are FSM eligible achieve¹ lower attainment (at over a grade per subject in 2023/24) and make less progress (at over half a grade per subject) compared to all pupils.
- Pupils with SEND also achieve, on average, lower attainment (at over three grades lower per subject for pupils with EHCPs, and over a grade lower per subject for pupils with SEN Support) and make less progress (at over a grade per subject for pupils with EHCPs, and over two-fifths of a grade per subject for pupils with SEN Support) compared to all pupils. These patterns are not causal: a pupil may be more likely to have a SEND identified because of poor attainment, rather than the other way around.
- Disadvantaged pupils with SEND are among the lowest achieving (in terms of both attainment and progress) in the school system. On average, disadvantaged pupils receiving SEN Support achieve a grade lower across their subjects than non-disadvantaged pupils

¹ Pupil outcome data draws on 2023/24 rather than 2024/25, as no progress data is available for the 2024/25 GCSE cohort due to pandemic disruption to KS2 exams for this cohort.

receiving SEN Support. Among pupils with EHCPs, the figure is slightly smaller with disadvantaged pupils achieving on average 0.8 of a grade less across all subjects than non-disadvantaged pupils.

- Schools and local authorities (LAs) with higher rates of FSM pupils tend to have slightly higher rates of pupils with SEN Support needs. There is, however, a less clear relationship between the proportion of FSM pupils and pupils with EHCPs in a school or LA.

1 Introduction

This briefing report provides an update on social selectivity in England’s top performing comprehensive schools, building on the Sutton Trust’s 2017 and 2024 reports (Cullinane et al., 2017; Tang & Agarwal, 2024). It also explores the wider overlap between pupil outcomes, disadvantage and special educational needs and disability (SEND) representation in England’s schools.

The primary aim of this research is to assess whether the top performing comprehensives are representative of their local areas in terms of the socio-economic background of their pupils. We define the ‘top’ comprehensives by considering schools with the top 500 academic attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 (see box on page 5). We then compare the intakes of top comprehensive schools with their catchments. Where there are differences between a school’s intake and its catchment area, these may be due to a range of different factors (e.g., related to actions by the school or by parents/families). It is not possible to unequivocally attribute any differences observed to one factor, but highlighting any gaps is a first step towards explaining and addressing them.

In addition, this report seeks to put these findings into a broader context by exploring the overlap between free school meal (FSM) eligibility and SEND identification across secondary schools more generally. It considers how pupil outcomes vary across these groups, and the relationship between these measures across pupils, schools and local authorities (LAs).

Our analysis relies on the numbers of pupils identified as having an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or SEN Support in the available Department for Education (DfE) data. These need to be interpreted with caution: SEN Support identification practices vary across schools, and local differences in how pupils are supported, assessed and issued with EHCPs can influence who receives one. These factors affect the data and determine which children are recorded as having an EHCP or SEN Support.

Further detail on our approach can be found in the Methodological Appendix.

2 The social composition of the top 500 comprehensive schools

This section analyses the social composition of the top 500 comprehensive secondary schools in comparison to their catchment areas and nationally. It considers representation in terms of social disadvantage as measured by both FSM eligibility and SEND (as defined by having an EHCP and/or SEN Support needs).

2.1 By disadvantage

Table 1 presents, among all secondary comprehensive schools and the top 500 performing comprehensives, average school FSM rates (first row), average FSM rate in school catchment area (second row) and the average difference (which we also call ‘gap’) between school and catchment FSM rates (third row). By comparing average school FSM rates to their catchment areas, we can account for the possibility that top performing schools may be enrolling pupils from very different pools of pupils to the average school.

The table shows that, while top comprehensive schools (across all measures) have lower than average school FSM rates than all secondary comprehensives, their catchment areas tend to be only slightly less disadvantaged in terms of FSM eligibility. This in turn, means that while all secondary schools have, on average, a negative gap between their school FSM rate and their catchment area (at -1.0 percentage points), this gap is much larger for selective comprehensives.

Table 1: Average school FSM rates, FSM rates in school catchment areas and difference between school and catchment FSM rates

	All secondary comprehensive schools (%)	Top 500 performing comprehensives (%) based on:		
		Progress 8	Attainment 8	Grade four or above in English and Maths
Average school FSM rate	26.4	20.3	16.7	16.0
Average FSM rate in school catchment area	27.4	25.4	23.1	22.2
Average difference between school and catchment FSM rates	-1.0	-5.1	-6.3	-6.1

Source: NFER analysis of National Pupil Database (NPD)

Among the top 500 comprehensive schools based on Progress 8, there is a gap of -5.1 percentage points, indicating that these schools have much lower percentages of FSM pupils as compared to their catchment areas. This gap is even larger among schools ranking highly based on Attainment 8 or percentage of pupils achieving grade four or above in English and Maths at -6.3 and -6.1 percentage points, respectively.

As compared to the 500 top comprehensive schools in 2021/22, these gaps appear to have widened slightly (at -4.3 percentage points for Progress 8 in 2021/22, -5.8 percentage points for Attainment 8 and -5.6 percentage points for the percentage of pupils achieving grade four or above in English and Maths).

Table 2 presents the spread of FSM gaps across schools. It confirms that among all secondary schools, just over half (51 per cent) have a positive gap – that is, a higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils than their catchment areas. However, this is not the case for the top performing schools in Progress 8, where around three-quarters of the schools have a negative gap. This pattern is even more pronounced among the top comprehensive schools in Attainment 8, where 86 per cent have a negative gap.

Table 2: Spread of top 500 comprehensives by FSM gap

FSM gap (percentage points)	All comprehensive secondary schools		Top 500 Progress 8		Top 500 Attainment 8	
	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools
Positive or no gap	1,526	51%	121	24%	72	14%
Between -5 and 0 p.p. (inclusive)	877	29%	172	34%	174	35%
Between -10 and -5 p.p. (inclusive)	442	15%	135	27%	169	34%
Between -15 and -10 p.p. (inclusive)	132	4%	50	10%	60	12%
Less than -15 p.p.	40	1%	22	4%	25	5%

Source: NFER analysis of NPD

Further breakdowns of representation among the top 500 comprehensive schools are presented for different groups of schools (e.g., school type, sex selection, deprivation quintile and region) in the Data Appendix.

Tables in the Data Appendix also explore representation among the top 500 comprehensive schools based on the Index of Deprivation Affecting Children (IDACI) which is an area-based measure of disadvantage. Findings suggest that top performing comprehensives have an under-representation of pupils from the most disadvantaged areas, which is consistent with the findings outlined above for FSM.

2.2 By SEND

2.2.1 By EHCP rate

Analogous to Table 1, Table 3 presents, among secondary comprehensive schools and the top 500 performing comprehensives, average school EHCP rates (first row), the average EHCP rate in

school catchment areas (second row) and the average difference or ‘gap’ between school and catchment EHCP rates (third row). It shows that EHCP rates are largely comparable between top comprehensive schools, top performing schools and their catchment areas. In other words, schools are representative of the pupils in their areas. This suggests that there is no sorting, on average, of pupils from catchment areas into the top performing schools in terms of having an EHCP².

However, we do find that EHCP representation in top comprehensive schools differs by pupil disadvantage. Table 13 in the Data Appendix presents further breakdowns of EHCP rates by disadvantage. It shows that, as compared to their catchments and all secondary comprehensives, top performing comprehensive schools have a slight over-representation in non-disadvantaged pupils with EHCPs but a slight under-representation in disadvantaged pupils with EHCPs. This finding reflects wider inequalities in access to EHCPs by socioeconomic background, with research having shown that disadvantaged pupils face greater barriers in accessing EHCPs (The Sutton Trust, 2025).

Table 3: Average Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan rates

	All secondary comprehensive schools (%)	Top 500 performing comprehensives (%) based on:		
		Progress 8	Attainment 8	Grade four or above in English and Maths
Average school EHCP rate	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.9
Average EHCP rate in school catchment area	2.9	2.9	3.0	2.9
Average difference between school and catchment EHCP rates	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.0

Source: NFER analysis of NPD

2.2.2 By SEN Support rate

There are, however, greater differences between top performing comprehensives and all secondary schools when it comes to SEN Support rates, as shown by Table 4.

While EHCP rates are comparable between all secondary comprehensive schools and the top performing comprehensives, Table 4 shows that top performing comprehensives have a lower proportion of pupils with SEN Support compared to all secondary schools. As the top 500

² This conclusion is confirmed by the distribution of EHCP gaps across schools which are largely comparable between top performing comprehensives and all secondary schools as shown in Table 9 in the Data Appendix.

comprehensive schools have, on average, only a slightly lower proportion of pupils with SEN Support in their catchment areas compared to all secondary schools, this leads to a gap in SEN Support rates between top comprehensives and all secondary schools.

While all secondary schools have more pupils in receipt of SEN Support on average compared to their catchments (with a gap of 0.4), the top 500 performing comprehensives have on average at least one percentage point fewer pupils identified as SEN Support compared to their catchment.

When SEN Support rates are analysed together with disadvantage (see Table 13 in the Data Appendix), it appears this trend is predominantly driven by under-representation of SEN Support pupils with FSM in top comprehensive schools as compared to their catchments³.

As outlined in section 1, differences in the rates of pupils in receipt of SEN Support across schools may be due to a range of factors, including identification practices. While one explanation for this finding may be that top performing schools are less likely to have high levels of pupils with SEN needs, another explanation is that top performing comprehensive schools are better at meeting pupil needs through their day-to-day provision.

Table 4: SEN Support rates

	All secondary comprehensive schools (%)	Top 500 performing comprehensives (%) based on:		
		Progress 8	Attainment 8	Grade four or above in English and Maths
Average school SEN Support rate	14.6	11.9	11.3	11.2
Average SEN Support rate in school catchment area	14.2	13.1	12.8	12.8
Average difference between school and catchment SEN Support rates	0.4	-1.2	-1.6	-1.7

Source: NFER analysis of NPD

Table 5 presents the distribution of these gaps: it shows that around one in five of all comprehensive secondary schools has a SEN Support gap of -2.5 per cent or more. This pattern is

³ SEN Support pupils who are not FSM are also under-represented in top performing comprehensives compared to their catchments but to a lesser extent.

even starker among the top performing comprehensive schools, with over a third of them having a gap of this magnitude.

Table 5: Spread of top 500 comprehensives by SEN Support gap

SEN Support gap (percentage points)	All comprehensive secondary schools		Top 500 Progress 8		Top 500 Attainment 8	
	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools
5 p.p. or more	368	12%	29	6%	21	4%
Between 2.5 (inclusive) and 5 p.p.	475	16%	45	9%	37	7%
Between 0 p.p. (inclusive) and 2.5 p.p.	795	26%	104	21%	89	18%
Between -2.5 p.p. (inclusive) and 0 p.p.	780	26%	141	28%	159	32%
Less than -2.5 p.p.	599	20%	181	36%	194	39%

Source: NFER analysis of NPD

As shown in Table 10 and Table 11 in the Data Appendix, the patterns identified for SEN Support pupils are broadly replicated if SEND is identified based on whether a pupil has any identified SEN (either an EHCP and or/SEN support). This follows from the fact that most pupils with any identified SEN are in receipt of SEN Support rather than an EHCP.

2.2.3 By disadvantage and SEND

Table 6 presents the distribution of schools in terms of both their FSM and SEND gaps relative to their catchments. It shows that schools with negative FSM gaps are very slightly more likely to have a negative EHCP gap across both all comprehensive secondary schools and top performing comprehensive schools based on Attainment 8 (69 per cent compared to 58 per cent), but there are no differences with top performing Progress 8 scores (57 per cent).

However, when it comes to SEN Support or any SEND, schools with a negative FSM gap are much more likely to have a negative SEND gap, particularly among top comprehensive schools. This suggests that top comprehensive schools which are less representative in terms of disadvantage, are also less representative in terms of SEND Support. This is not altogether surprising as there is a significant overlap between pupil disadvantage and SEN identification. In 2024/25, while 26 per cent of all pupils in state-funded schools were eligible for FSM, this rate was

38 per cent among those pupils with identified SEN Support needs and 42 per cent among pupils with an EHCP⁴.

Table 6: Spread of schools' FSM and SEND gaps

	All secondary comprehensive schools		Top 500 Progress 8		Top 500 Attainment 8	
	Negative FSM gap	Positive gap or null FSM gap	Negative FSM gap	Positive gap or null FSM gap	Negative FSM gap	Positive gap or null FSM gap
EHCP gap						
Negative EHCP gap	58%	50%	57%	44%	69%	43%
Positive or no EHCP gap	42%	50%	43%	56%	31%	57%
SEN Support						
Negative SEN Support gap	62%	29%	74%	49%	73%	39%
Positive or no SEN Support gap	38%	71%	26%	51%	27%	61%
Any SEND						
Negative any SEND gap	62%	30%	71%	44%	69%	43%
Positive or no any SEND gap	38%	70%	29%	56%	31%	57%

Source: NFER analysis of NPD

Note: Each column presents the share of schools with negative or positive SEND gaps among schools with a negative or positive FSM gap respectively.

⁴ Department for Education, 2025.

3 Exploring the overlap between SEND, disadvantage and outcomes

This section explores the relationship between disadvantage, SEND and KS4 outcome measures at different levels (pupil, school, LA). It seeks to put the findings for social selectivity of top comprehensives into a broader context by exploring the overlap between FSM eligibility and SEND identification across secondary schools more generally.

3.1 At the pupil level

Table 7 presents average Attainment 8 and Progress 8 scores in 2023/24 by FSM and SEND status. It shows that pupils who are FSM eligible achieve on average lower levels of attainment (at over a grade less per subject) and progress (at over half a grade less per subject) compared to all pupils. Additionally, pupils with any SEND achieve, on average, lower attainment and less progress compared to all pupils. In 2023/24, on average, pupils with EHCPs achieve over three grades per subject lower than all pupils. Similarly, pupils on SEN Support achieved over a grade less per subject than all pupils.

These patterns are not causal and should be interpreted cautiously: a pupil may be more likely to have a SEND need identified because of poor attainment, rather than the other way around. In addition, attainment may not necessarily be the best measure of outcomes or success for pupils with certain types of SEND.

Table 7: Attainment 8 and Progress 8 in 2023/24 by FSM and SEND status

	Average Attainment 8 score	Average Progress 8 score
All pupils	45.90	-0.03
By FSM eligibility		
FSM eligible	34.60	-0.57
Not known to be FSM eligible	49.50	0.14
By SEND		
Any SEN (EHCP or SEN Support)	27.80	-0.63
EHC plan	14.20	-1.13
SEN Support	33.10	-0.45
No identified SEN	49.80	0.10

Source: NFER analysis of DfE's 'Key stage 4 performance' publication

Note: Average grade per subject can be estimated by dividing Attainment 8 scores by 10

Table 8 shows that being disadvantaged and having an identified SEND need represents a double disadvantage for pupils in terms of outcomes (Attainment 8 and Progress 8). On average, disadvantaged pupils with SEN Support needs achieve over a grade lower across their subjects than non-disadvantaged pupils with SEN Support needs. Among pupils with EHCPs, the figure is

slightly smaller with disadvantaged pupils achieving on average 0.7 of a grade less across all subjects than their non-disadvantaged counterparts.

This highlights the fact that schools with more pupils who are FSM eligible and/or with SEND are likely to have lower school performance measures on average. This may disincentivise some schools from being inclusive.

Table 8: Attainment 8 and Progress 8 by SEN provision and FSM status

	FSM eligible	Not known to be FSM eligible	Total
Progress 8			
Any SEN (EHCP or SEN Support)	-1.04	-0.39	-0.63
EHC plan	-1.35	-0.96	-1.13
SEN Support	-0.89	-0.21	-0.45
No identified SEN	-0.4	0.24	0.10
Total	-0.57	0.14	-0.03
Attainment 8			
Any SEN (EHCP or SEN Support)	20.1	32.3	27.8
EHC plan	10.2	17.3	14.2
SEN Support	25	37.4	33.1
No identified SEN	39.8	52.5	49.8
Total	34.6	49.5	45.9

Source: NFER analysis of DfE's 'Key stage 4 performance' publication

Note: Average grade per subject can be estimated by dividing Attainment 8 scores by 10

3.1.1 At the school level

Our analysis explores whether schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged pupils also have higher proportions of pupils with SEND. Our analysis confirms this is the case (Figure 2 in the Data Appendix⁵). There is, however, a less clear relationship between the level of FSM in a school or local area and the level of EHCPs identified (see Figure 1, which shows a weak positive relationship).

This shows that our findings in Section 2 appear to be generalisable to the wider secondary school population: schools with lower FSM rates also tend to have lower rates of SEN Support. Further research is needed to better understand the interplay between SEND identification, need and disadvantage.

⁵ All the figures of this section can be found in the Data Appendix

3.1.1.1 At the local authority level

Patterns at the school level are mirrored across LAs. LAs with higher proportions of disadvantaged pupils do not have higher proportions of pupils with an EHCP but do present higher proportions of pupils with SEN Support. Our analysis within local authorities also considers whether LAs with bigger differences in FSM rates between schools also have bigger SEND rates between schools⁶. Again, while there is only a very weakly positive relationship when it comes to EHCPs and disadvantage, local authorities with a more diverse set of schools in terms of FSM rates, also have a more diverse set of schools in terms of SEN Support.

⁶ We estimate this measure as follows. Using the school rates, we define gaps as the difference between the values at the 75 percentile minus the value at 25 percentile within LAs (we also include an alternative specification with percentile 90 and 10). An interpretation of these measures is that the higher the gap, the more diverse the school rates within the LA.

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Methodological Appendix

Social composition of selective comprehensives

FSM is a proxy measure of the socio-economic background of the pupils attending a school, which was used to measure the social composition of the top 500 comprehensive schools. In this analysis, a school's FSM rate is the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals based on the school's youngest cohort (generally Year 7) in the academic years 2023/24, 2022/23 and 2021/22. We followed a similar approach for SEND, in which we estimate three measures: pupils with an EHCP; pupils with SEN Support; and pupils with any SEN Support (which is the combination of EHC and SEN Support pupils).

FSM and SEND rates for the entire group of top 500 schools (for each outcome measure) were calculated using the number of Year 7 pupils in each FSM and SEN measure across the top 500 as a proportion of all Year 7 pupils at the same set of schools. This method of calculating an average across individual rates is a slight deviation from the methodology adopted in the 2017 analysis where group-level rates were calculated by taking an average across the constituent school-level rates. Using a weighted average approach for groups of schools (as we have done in this report) accounts for the overall FSM or SEND rate across schools, but it will mean that some schools have more (or less) impact on the overall average compared to taking a simple average of school rates. While the magnitude of rates differs slightly between the two methods, the relative position of the rates for the top 500 with respect to their catchment areas and all comprehensive schools is very similar. Rates for catchment areas were constructed using the same methodology as the top 500 schools.

It is worth noting that for this research, a school's rate is based on the rates in their Year 7 intake for the last three academic years: 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24, whereas the rankings for the top 500 groups are based on the attainment of pupils in Year 11 in 2023/24.

Constructing catchment areas

After defining the SEND and performance indicators and using the information on eligible pupils for FSM, catchment areas were determined by considering where Year 7 pupils in 2023/24, 2022/23 and 2021/22 lived. If there were at least five pupils starting in the school over the last three years living in an LSOA, then it was considered to be part of the school's catchment area.

There was a small number of schools which did not have enough pupils living in the same geographical area to construct catchment areas. These schools were also excluded in the analysis.

FSM and SEND gaps

To understand whether a school's intake is representative of their local geographical area in terms of socio-economic disadvantage and SEND, we compared the school's (FSM or SEND) rate to that of its catchment area. Where the proportions are the same, the school's intake is considered to be representative of the area it serves.

We calculated a 'gap' measure for each school as a proxy measure for the representativeness of a school's pupil body. For instance, the FSM gap is the proportion of FSM pupils in the school's

intake minus the proportion of FSM pupils in a school's catchment area (and similar for SEND measures). Where this number is positive, the school has a higher proportion of FSM pupils in its last three years of Year 7 than is found in its catchment area. Schools which have a negative FSM gap have fewer FSM pupils in their intake compared to their catchment area. The further from zero the FSM gap, the less representative the school's intake is in terms of socio-economic disadvantage.

Overlap between SEND, disadvantage and outcomes

This section draws on data from 'All state-funded pupil characteristics and geography data' from the Key stage 4 performance tables for the 2023/24 academic year, from 'Special educational needs in England' and 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics'. We focus on mainstream state-funded secondary schools with 30 pupils or more and exclude schools without any KS4 pupils. At the local authority level we also exclude areas with less than five state-funded secondary schools.

Data Appendix

Table 9: Spread of top 500 comprehensives by EHCP gap

EHCP plan gap (percentage points)	All comprehensive secondary schools		Top 500 Progress 8		Top 500 Attainment 8	
	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools
2.5 p.p. or more	230	9%	40	8%	39	8%
Between 0 (inclusive) and 2.5 p.p.	1,160	38%	188	38%	184	37%
Between -2.5 (inclusive) and 0 p.p.	1,577	52%	259	52%	264	53%
Less than -2.5 p.p.	50	2%	13	3%	13	3%

Source: NFER analysis of NPD

Table 10: Average Any SEN rate in school catchment and difference between school and catchment any SEN rates

	All secondary comprehensive schools (%)	Top 500 performing comprehensives (%) based on:		
		Progress 8	Attainment 8	Grade four or above in English and Maths
Average school any SEN rate	17.6	14.8	14.3	14.1
Average any SEN rate in school catchment area	17.1	16.0	15.8	15.8
Average difference between school and catchment any SEN rate	0.5	-1.1	-1.5	-1.7

Source: NFER analysis of NPD

Table 11: Spread of top 500 comprehensives by Any SEN gap

Any SEN gap (percentage points)	All comprehensive secondary schools		Top 500 Progress 8		Top 500 Attainment 8	
	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools
5 p.p. or more	463	15%	39	8%	28	6%
Between 2.5 (inclusive) and 5 p.p.	463	15%	54	11%	50	10%
Between 0 (inclusive) and 2.5 p.p.	699	23%	93	19%	84	17%
Between -2.5 (inclusive) and 0 p.p.	719	24%	117	23%	127	25%
Less than -2.5 p.p.	673	22%	197	39%	211	42%

Source: NFER analysis of NPD

Table 12: FSM rates and FSM gaps by different categories

	All comprehensive secondary schools			Top 500 (Progress 8)			Top 500 (Attainment 8)			Top 500 (Eng Maths)		
	% of schools	School FSM rate	FSM gap	% of schools	School FSM rate	FSM gap	% of schools	School FSM rate	FSM gap	% of schools	School FSM rate	FSM gap
School type												
Academy converter	52%	22	-3	60%	17	-6	65%	14	-6	66%	14	-6
Academy sponsor led	25%	36	3	14%	32	0	7%	28	-4	7%	26	-3
Community school	9%	25	-1	5%	21	-5	9%	18	-5	8%	17	-5
Foundation school	4%	29	2	2%	22	-3	2%	14	-5	2%	13	-5
Free schools	5%	28	-1	9%	25	-4	8%	23	-4	7%	23	-4
Voluntary aided school	5%	25	-5	9%	21	-8	10%	19	-9	10%	17	-9
Voluntary controlled school	1%	23	-1	0%	18	-6	0%	18	-6	0%	15	-7
Sex selection												
Mixed	93%	27	-1	80%	20	-5	80%	16	-6	81%	15	-6
Single sex	7%	23	-5	20%	22	-6	20%	20	-6	19%	19	-6

	All comprehensive secondary schools			Top 500 (Progress 8)			Top 500 (Attainment 8)			Top 500 (Eng Maths)		
	% of schools	School FSM rate	FSM gap	% of schools	School FSM rate	FSM gap	% of schools	School FSM rate	FSM gap	% of schools	School FSM rate	FSM gap
Deprivation quintile (based on IDACI)												
Quintile 1 (least deprived)	21%	13	-3	32%	10	-4	46%	10	-4	46%	10	-4
Quintile 2	19%	19	-2	19%	16	-5	19%	15	-5	21%	15	-5
Quintile 3	20%	25	-1	19%	22	-4	15%	19	-6	15%	19	-6
Quintile 4	20%	32	0	18%	30	-3	13%	27	-6	11%	26	-6
Quintile 5 (most deprived)	20%	44	4	12%	38	-2	8%	37	-4	6%	36	-5
Region												
East Midlands	9%	25	-1	7%	16	-7	6%	14	-9	7%	14	-8
East of England	12%	21	0	12%	14	-5	12%	11	-6	12%	10	-6
London	14%	30	0	35%	26	-3	34%	24	-4	30%	23	-4
North East	5%	33	-1	2%	23	-10	4%	16	-11	4%	17	-11
North West	14%	29	-2	8%	20	-8	9%	15	-9	10%	15	-8

	All comprehensive secondary schools			Top 500 (Progress 8)			Top 500 (Attainment 8)			Top 500 (Eng Maths)		
	% of schools	School FSM rate	FSM gap	% of schools	School FSM rate	FSM gap	% of schools	School FSM rate	FSM gap	% of schools	School FSM rate	FSM gap
South East	15%	21	0	14%	12	-6	18%	11	-6	18%	11	-6
South West	9%	23	0	5%	19	-3	5%	14	-6	6%	15	-5
West Midlands	11%	30	-2	7%	24	-7	7%	18	-8	6%	17	-7
Yorkshire and the Humber	11%	29	-2	10%	21	-7	6%	14	-9	7%	14	-7

Source: NFER analysis of NPD

Table 13: School, catchment and gaps by additional measures

	All secondary comprehensive schools (%)	Top 500 performing comprehensives (%) based on:		
		Progress 8	Attainment 8	Grade four or above in English and Maths
FSM and EHCP				
Average school FSM and EHCP rate	1.2	1.0	0.9	0.8
Average FSM and EHCP rate in school catchment area	1.2	1.1	1.1	1.1
Average difference between school and catchment FSM and EHCP rates	0.0	-0.2	-0.2	-0.2
FSM and SEN Support				
Average school FSM and SEN Support rate	5.6	3.6	2.9	2.8
Average FSM and SEN Support rate in school catchment area	5.7	4.9	4.5	4.4
Average difference between school and catchment FSM and SEN Support rates	-0.1	-1.3	-1.6	-1.6
Non-FSM and SEN Support				
Average school non-FSM and SEN Support rate	9.0	8.3	8.4	8.4
Average non-FSM and SEN Support rate in school catchment area	8.5	8.2	8.4	8.5

	All secondary comprehensive schools (%)	Top 500 performing comprehensives (%) based on:		
		Progress 8	Attainment 8	Grade four or above in English and Maths
Average difference between school and catchment non-FSM and SEN Support rates	0.5	0.1	0.0	-0.1
Non-FSM and EHCP				
Average school non-FSM and EHCP rate	1.8	2.0	2.1	2.1
Average non-FSM and EHCP rate in school catchment area	1.7	1.8	1.9	1.9
Average difference between school and catchment non-FSM and EHCP rates	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.2
IDACI				
IDACI 1 - Pupils in least deprived quintile of areas				
Average school share of pupils in IDACI quintile	19.7	26.0	33.8	34.6
Average IDACI quintile rate in school catchment area	16.9	19.5	25.3	26.4
Average difference between school and catchment IDACI rates	2.8	6.5	8.6	8.2
IDACI 2				

	All secondary comprehensive schools (%)	Top 500 performing comprehensives (%) based on:		
		Progress 8	Attainment 8	Grade four or above in English and Maths
Average school share of pupils in IDACI quintile	19.5	20.1	22.2	22.7
Average IDACI quintile rate in school catchment area	18.0	18.2	20.4	21.4
Average difference between school and catchment IDACI rates	1.5	1.9	1.8	1.3
IDACI 3				
Average school share of pupils in IDACI quintile	19.8	20.6	18.0	18.1
Average IDACI quintile rate in school catchment area	19.5	21.6	20.3	20.2
Average difference between school and catchment IDACI rates	0.3	-0.9	-2.3	-2.1
IDACI 4				
Average school share of pupils in IDACI quintile	20.5	19.3	15.6	15.0
Average IDACI quintile rate in school catchment area	21.9	22.5	19.5	18.6
Average difference between school and catchment IDACI rates	-1.4	-3.2	-4.0	-3.5

	All secondary comprehensive schools (%)	Top 500 performing comprehensives (%) based on:		
		Progress 8	Attainment 8	Grade four or above in English and Maths
IDACI 5 - Pupils in most deprived quintile of areas				
Average school share of pupils in IDACI quintile	20.4	13.9	10.4	9.4
Average IDACI quintile rate in school catchment area	23.5	18.2	14.4	13.3
Average difference between school and catchment IDACI rates	-3.1	-4.3	-4.0	-3.9

Source: NFER analysis of NPD

Table 14: Spread of top 500 comprehensives by additional measures

FSM gap (percentage points)	All comprehensive secondary schools		Top 500 Progress 8		Top 500 Attainment 8	
	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools
FSM and EHCP						
Positive or no gap	1,372	46%	176	35%	162	32%
Between 0 and -0.5 p.p. (inclusive)	1,027	34%	183	37%	196	39%
Between -0.5 and -1 p.p. (inclusive)	483	16%	101	20%	102	20%
Smaller than -1 p.p.	136	5%	40	8%	40	8%
No-FSM and EHCP						
Positive or no gap	1,382	46%	258	52%	264	53%
Between 0 and -0.5 p.p. (inclusive)	760	25%	99	20%	105	21%
Between -0.5 and -1 p.p. (inclusive)	576	19%	89	18%	78	16%
Smaller than -1 p.p.	300	10%	54	11%	53	11%
FSM and SEN Support						
Positive or no gap	1,472	49%	116	23%	75	15%
Between 0 and -0.5 p.p. (inclusive)	315	10%	50	10%	60	12%
Between -0.5 and -1 p.p. (inclusive)	317	11%	61	12%	72	14%
Between -1 and -1.5 p.p. (inclusive)	238	8%	58	12%	59	12%
Smaller than -1.5 p.p.	676	22%	215	43%	234	47%
Non- FSM and SEN Support						
Positive or no gap	1,666	55%	233	47%	226	45%
Between 0 and -0.5 p.p. (inclusive)	306	10%	39	8%	48	10%
Between -0.5 and -1 p.p. (inclusive)	240	8%	39	8%	39	8%
Between -1 and -1.5 p.p. (inclusive)	239	8%	54	11%	47	9%

FSM gap (percentage points)	All comprehensive secondary schools		Top 500 Progress 8		Top 500 Attainment 8	
	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools
Smaller than -1 p.p.	567	19%	135	27%	140	28%

Source: NFER analysis of NPD

Table 15: IDACI rates and gaps by different categories

	IDACI quintile	All comprehensive secondary schools			Top 500 (Progress 8)			Top 500 (Attainment 8)			Top 500 (Eng Maths 8)		
		School IDACI	Catchment IDACI	IDACI gap	School IDACI	Catchment IDACI	IDACI gap	School IDACI	Catchment IDACI	IDACI gap	School IDACI	Catchment IDACI	IDACI gap
School type													
Academy converter and free schools	1	25%	21%	4.1	30%	23%	7.5	37%	28%	9.0	37%	28%	8.8
Academy converter and free schools	2	22%	21%	1.9	21%	20%	1.7	23%	21%	1.5	23%	22%	1.0
Academy converter and free schools	3	20%	20%	0.0	20%	22%	-1.4	18%	20%	-2.3	18%	20%	-2.2
Academy converter and free schools	4	18%	20%	-2.0	17%	21%	-3.5	14%	18%	-4.1	14%	18%	-3.8
Academy converter and free schools	5	14%	19%	-4.0	11%	15%	-4.2	8%	12%	-4.1	8%	12%	-3.9
Academy sponsor led	1	9%	9%	-0.7	9%	9%	0.7	15%	12%	3.7	17%	14%	3.0
Academy sponsor led	2	13%	13%	0.1	14%	13%	1.5	16%	16%	0.6	19%	18%	0.8
Academy sponsor led	3	18%	18%	0.6	22%	21%	1.1	18%	19%	-0.5	18%	18%	0.8
Academy sponsor led	4	25%	25%	0.5	29%	30%	-0.9	23%	25%	-1.3	22%	23%	-0.5
Academy sponsor led	5	35%	35%	-0.4	25%	28%	-2.3	27%	29%	-2.6	24%	28%	-4.1
LA maintained schools (exc. voluntary aided)	1	21%	18%	3.3	27%	19%	7.9	38%	29%	9.3	39%	30%	9.4

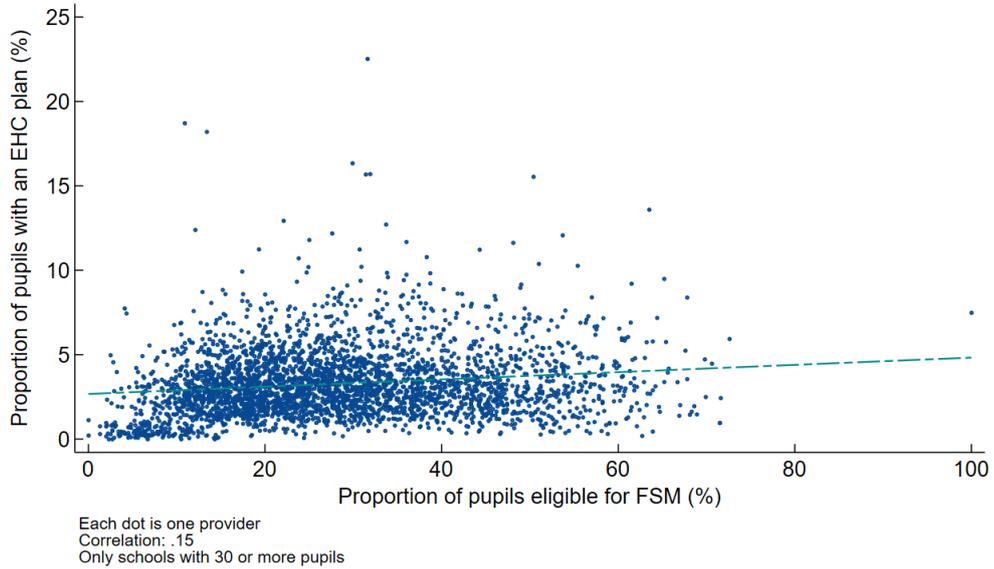
LA maintained schools (exc. voluntary aided)	2	20%	18%	2.0	21%	18%	3.2	24%	20%	3.5	24%	21%	3.0
LA maintained schools (exc. voluntary aided)	3	21%	21%	0.1	25%	28%	-2.9	18%	22%	-4.2	19%	23%	-4.8
LA maintained schools (exc. voluntary aided)	4	21%	23%	-1.9	17%	21%	-4.0	13%	17%	-4.5	12%	17%	-4.7
LA maintained schools (exc. voluntary aided)	5	16%	20%	-3.5	10%	14%	-4.2	7%	12%	-4.1	6%	9%	-2.9
Voluntary aided school	1	15%	14%	1.4	18%	15%	3.5	21%	16%	4.3	23%	20%	3.6
Voluntary aided school	2	16%	15%	1.2	17%	15%	2.0	19%	17%	1.5	20%	19%	1.1
Voluntary aided school	3	18%	18%	0.6	18%	18%	0.3	20%	21%	-1.4	20%	20%	-0.6
Voluntary aided school	4	24%	25%	-0.6	24%	26%	-1.6	23%	25%	-2.2	21%	22%	-1.2
Voluntary aided school	5	26%	29%	-2.5	23%	27%	-4.1	17%	20%	-2.4	16%	19%	-2.9
School type													
London	1	10%	8%	1.8	12%	9%	2.4	16%	12%	3.5	17%	13%	3.5
London	2	15%	14%	1.5	17%	15%	2.2	20%	17%	2.4	21%	18%	2.1
London	3	24%	24%	0.2	27%	27%	-0.8	24%	25%	-1.3	24%	25%	-1.2
London	4	31%	33%	-1.9	28%	31%	-2.4	26%	29%	-3.3	25%	28%	-2.8
London	5	20%	21%	-1.6	16%	17%	-1.4	15%	17%	-1.4	14%	15%	-1.6
Midlands and East of England	1	20%	17%	2.6	30%	23%	7.1	39%	29%	9.3	38%	29%	8.9

Midlands and East of England	2	21%	19%	1.4	23%	21%	2.3	24%	23%	0.7	25%	24%	0.2
Midlands and East of England	3	20%	19%	0.8	19%	19%	-0.2	17%	19%	-1.7	18%	19%	-1.5
Midlands and East of England	4	20%	21%	-0.9	15%	18%	-3.0	12%	15%	-3.2	12%	15%	-3.1
Midlands and East of England	5	20%	24%	-3.9	12%	18%	-6.2	8%	13%	-5.1	7%	12%	-4.6
North	1	19%	16%	2.9	31%	22%	9.1	42%	31%	11.3	42%	31%	10.5
North	2	16%	14%	1.6	17%	15%	1.8	20%	18%	2.3	20%	19%	1.7
North	3	14%	14%	0.8	13%	12%	0.6	12%	13%	-1.1	13%	14%	-0.9
North	4	21%	22%	-1.0	18%	21%	-3.3	13%	17%	-4.4	13%	17%	-3.7
North	5	30%	35%	-4.3	21%	30%	-8.2	13%	21%	-8.1	12%	20%	-7.6
South	1	26%	24%	2.3	41%	32%	8.8	49%	38%	10.4	47%	38%	9.6
South	2	25%	24%	0.7	24%	24%	0.1	26%	25%	0.7	26%	25%	0.6
South	3	24%	25%	-0.8	20%	23%	-3.4	15%	20%	-5.1	16%	21%	-4.6
South	4	15%	16%	-0.8	10%	13%	-3.3	7%	11%	-3.6	8%	11%	-3.5
South	5	10%	11%	-1.3	5%	7%	-2.2	3%	6%	-2.3	3%	5%	-2.1
Gender mix													
Mixed	1	20%	17%	2.7	28%	21%	6.8	37%	28%	9.1	38%	29%	8.6

Mixed	2	20%	18%	1.5	21%	19%	1.6	23%	21%	1.5	23%	22%	0.9
Mixed	3	20%	20%	0.3	20%	22%	-1.1	17%	20%	-2.5	17%	20%	-2.2
Mixed	4	20%	22%	-1.3	18%	21%	-3.2	14%	18%	-4.0	14%	17%	-3.4
Mixed	5	20%	23%	-3.1	13%	17%	-4.1	9%	13%	-4.0	8%	12%	-3.9
Single sex	1	17%	14%	2.7	18%	14%	3.6	21%	17%	3.7	22%	18%	3.8
Single sex	2	18%	16%	1.7	18%	15%	2.4	20%	18%	2.1	21%	19%	2.0
Single sex	3	21%	20%	0.3	21%	22%	-0.2	21%	22%	-0.9	21%	22%	-0.9
Single sex	4	24%	25%	-1.3	24%	26%	-2.0	22%	24%	-2.3	22%	24%	-2.2
Single sex	5	21%	24%	-3.4	19%	23%	-3.8	16%	19%	-2.6	15%	17%	-2.7

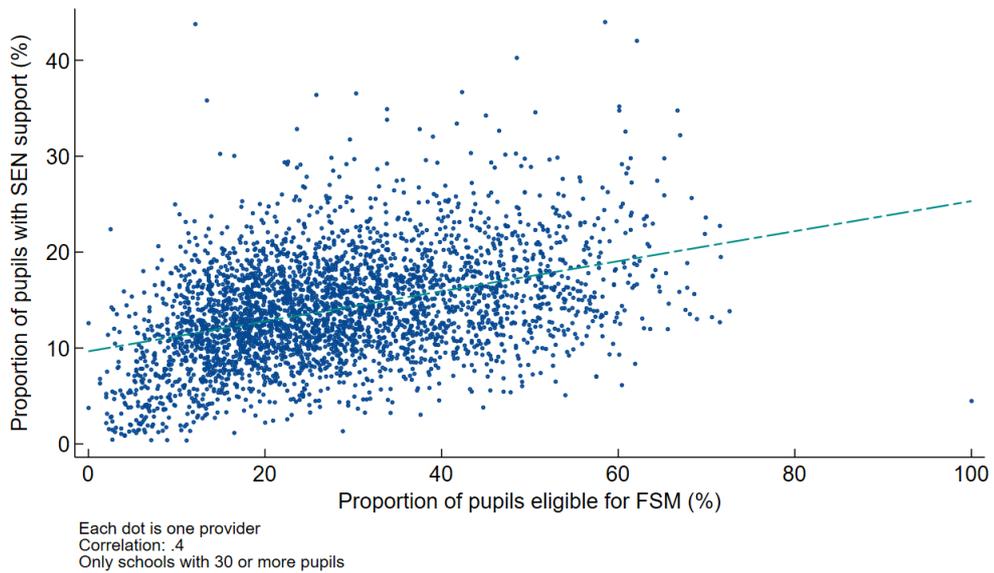
Source: NFER analysis of NPD

Figure 1: Relationship between EHCP rates and FSM rates at the school level



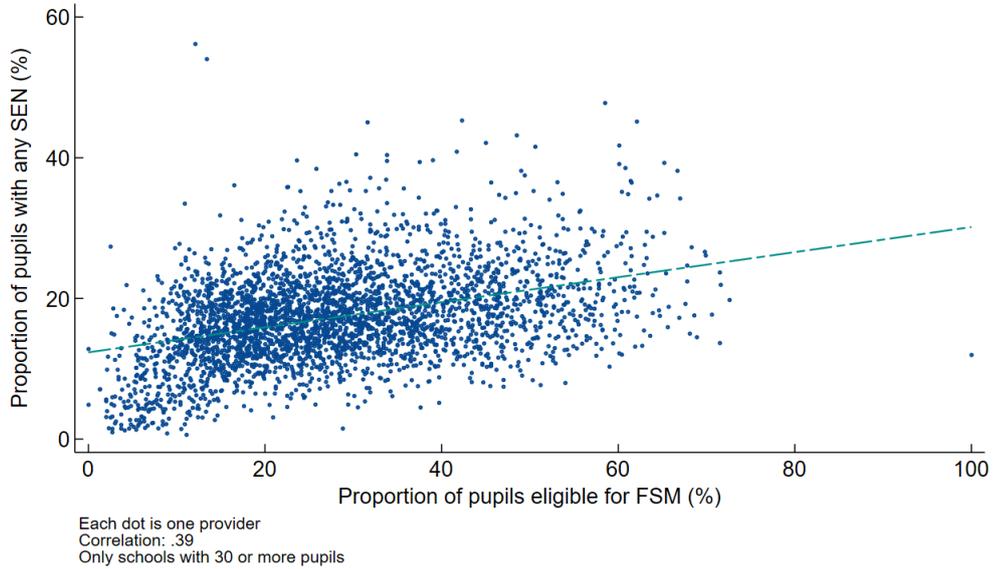
Source: NFER analysis of DfE's 'School, pupils, and their characteristics' and 'Special educational needs in England'

Figure 2: Relationship between SEN Support rates and FSM rates at the school level



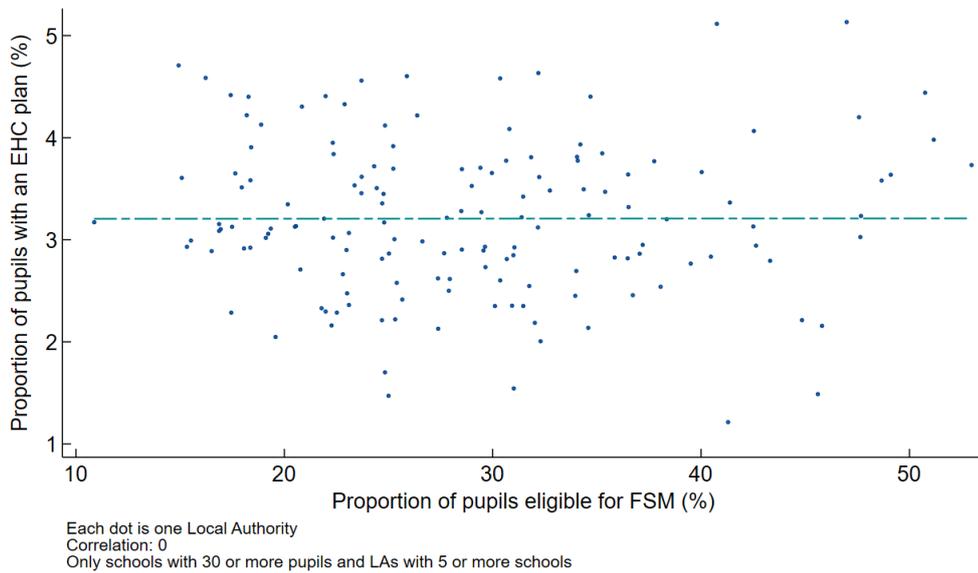
Source: NFER analysis of DfE's 'School, pupils, and their characteristics' and 'Special educational needs in England'

Figure 3: Relationship between any SEN rates and FSM rates at the school level



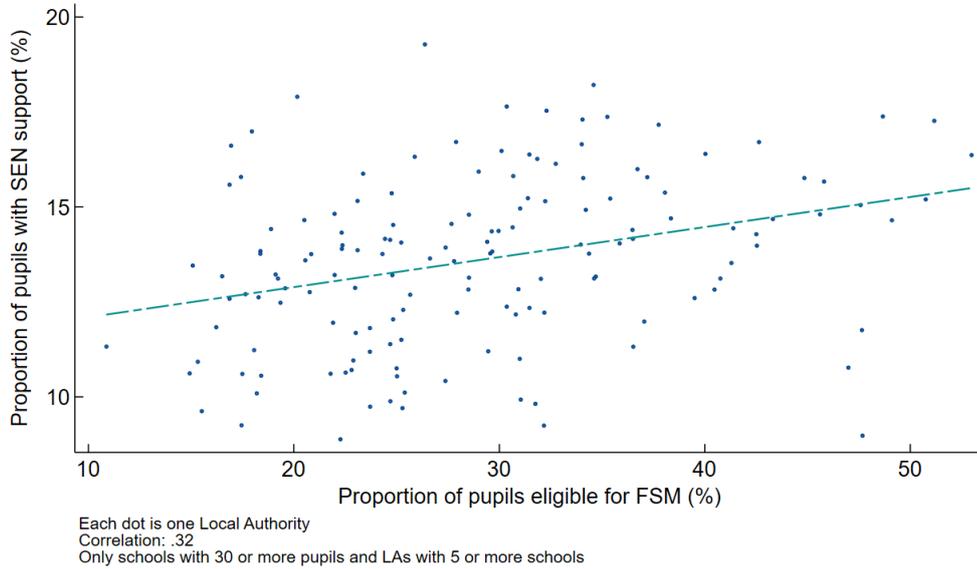
Source: NFER analysis of DfE's 'School, pupils, and their characteristics' and 'Special educational needs in England'

Figure 4: Relationship between EHCP rates and FSM rates at the local authority level



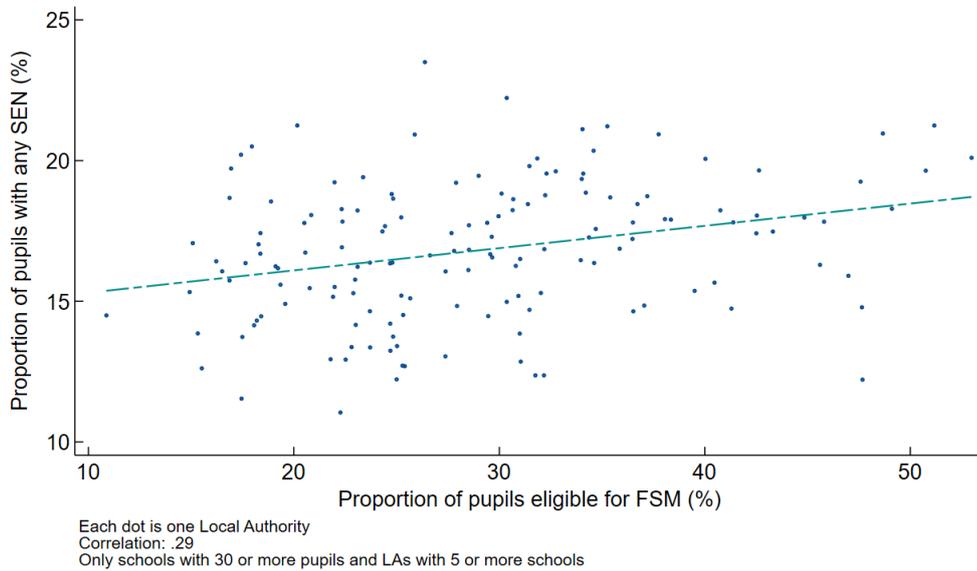
Source: NFER analysis of DfE's 'School, pupils, and their characteristics' and 'Special educational needs in England'

Figure 5: Relationship between SEN Support rates and FSM rates at the local authority level



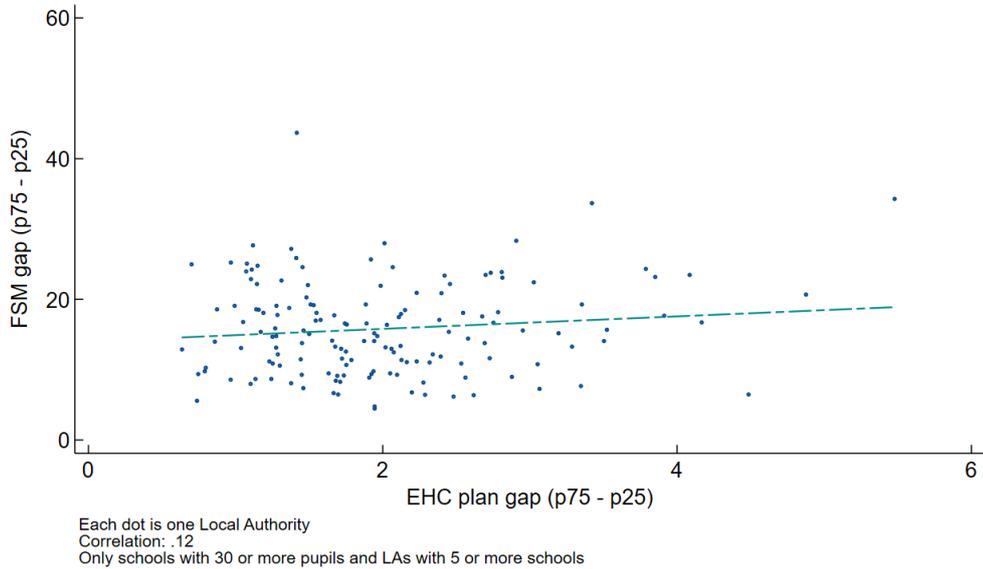
Source: NFER analysis of DfE's 'School, pupils, and their characteristics' and 'Special educational needs in England'

Figure 6: Relationship between Any SEN rates and FSM rates at the local authority level



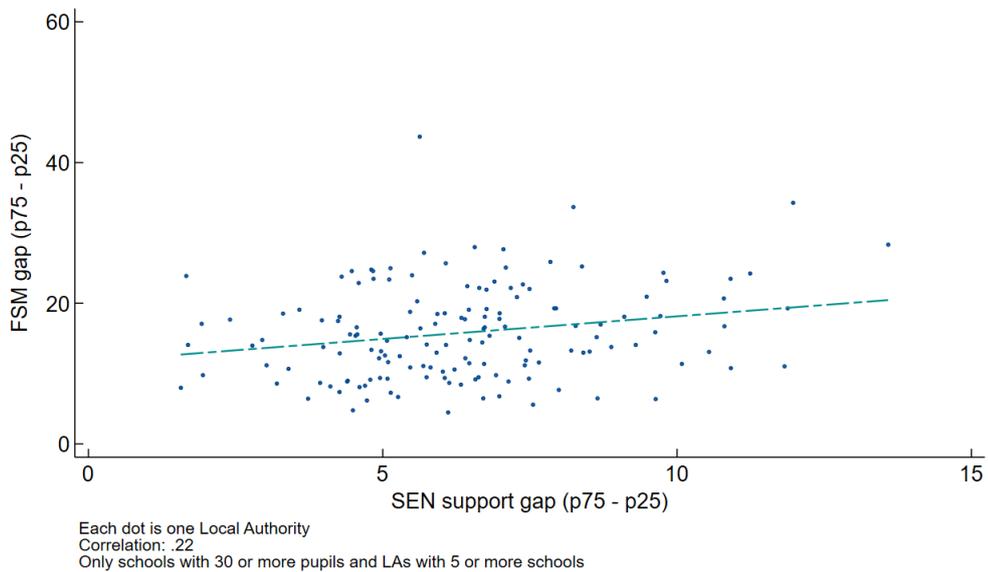
Source: NFER analysis of DfE's 'School, pupils, and their characteristics' and 'Special educational needs in England'

Figure 7: Relationship between EHCP gaps (p75 and p25) and FSM gaps (p75 – p25) at the school level



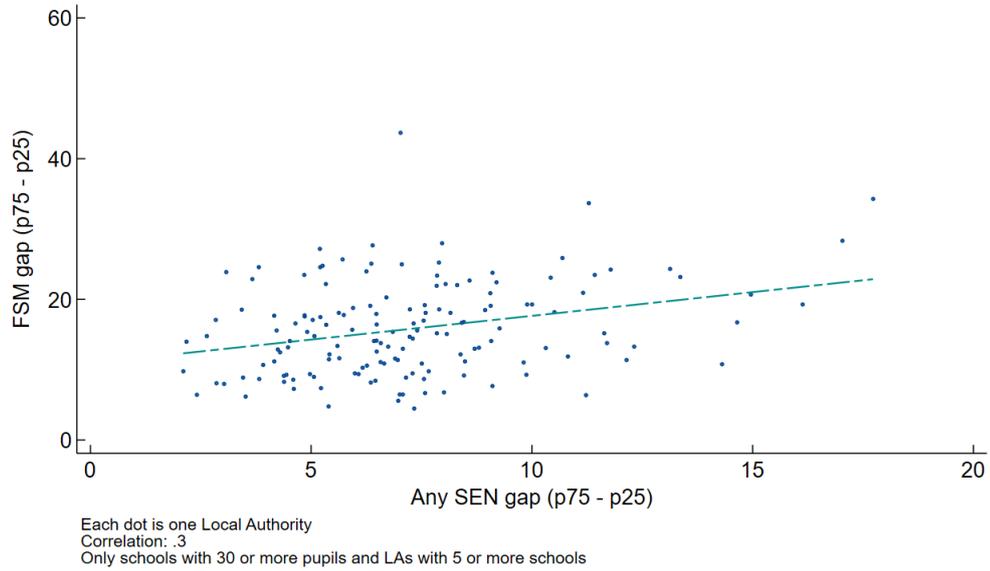
Source: NFER analysis of DfE’s ‘School, pupils, and their characteristics’ and ‘Special educational needs in England’

Figure 8: Relationship between SEN Support gaps (p75 and p25) and FSM gaps (p75 – p25) at the school level



Source: NFER analysis of DfE’s ‘School, pupils, and their characteristics’ and ‘Special educational needs in England’

Figure 9: Relationship between any SEN gaps (p75 and p25) and FSM gaps (p75 – p25) at the school level



Source: NFER analysis of DfE's 'School, pupils, and their characteristics' and 'Special educational needs in England'

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