Taken from ‘The Key for School Governors.’

Improving the achievement of low attaining pupils

How can we ensure low attainers achieve the best they can? Governors are responsible for promoting high standards of achievement for all pupils, including low attainers. We set out practical guidance from one of our associate education experts on how governors can fulfil this role.

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Finding out why pupils attainment is low

Alice explained that low attainers are those pupils who, for a wide range of reasons, might not be making the kind of progress expected for their age group.

‘Low attainers’ refers to those pupils who are achieving less than their peers, or less than expected, within a cohort. It might also apply to those gifted or able students who are not making as much progress as they could.

The remit of the governing board is to ensure that **all** pupils are making appropriate and good progress, whatever their actual ability or relative level.

Alice suggested a number of societal and environmental factors that contribute to low educational achievement. These include:

Low attainers are those pupils who, for a wide range of reasons, might not be making the kind of progress expected for their age group

* **Gender:**Depending on the age of the child and the subject, there can sometimes be quite pronounced gender splits, where boys may be underperforming relative to their female peers
* **Ethnic groups:**Another well-documented variable is ethnicity, where cultural expectations and attitudes towards education and learning affect the performance of pupils in school. These may also have religious or racial foundations
* **English as an additional language (EAL):** There may be significant gaps in a pupil’s understanding if English is a new, additional or second language. It may also be problematic if parents do not speak English. This can affect the level of support with homework and communication or access to teachers and school structures
* **Physical and mental health:**Pupils who are absent from school for medical reasons or require support with either physical or mental health problems may underperform academically
* **Absence from school:** Poor attendance may explain why some pupils are not making adequate progress
* **Special educational needs (SEN):** Sometimes pupils with SEN are not diagnosed effectively or quickly enough, and it can take schools a long time to get the right kind of educational support systems in place to ensure pupils with SEN are making appropriate progress
* **Poverty and other demographic factors:**There is a greater proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) who underachieve than do not. These pupils often come from families where fewer resources are available
* **Pupil engagement, attitudes to education and self-esteem:**Often if pupils know they are labelled as low attainers, the consequent knock to their confidence can de-motivate them. This is often true when pupils are streamed according to ability
* **Looked-after children (LAC):** According to research published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JFR), children in care are 9 times more likely than the average child to have SEN

Questions for governors

**Appropriateness of the curriculum**

* How is the curriculum designed to be relevant and engaging for all learners?
* How do you ensure breadth and depth of curriculum provision?
* Are there opportunities for all learners to enjoy and be successful in your curriculum?

**Academic/vocational options**

* Is there enough diversity within the curriculum and the choice of qualification to ensure that all learners are able to succeed?
* Are there opportunities for low attainers in academic subjects to be successful in vocational subjects?

**Quality of teaching**

Are lessons effectively differentiated to accommodate all learners?

* Are lessons effectively differentiated to accommodate all learners?
* Do teachers know which of their pupils are low attainers? What have they put in place to ensure these learners are making appropriate progress?
* What interventions, known to be successful, are timetabled and resourced for low attainers?

**Staff deployment and continuing professional development (CPD)**

* How are staff, both teaching and support staff, deployed effectively to ensure that low attainers are getting appropriate and consistent support?
* What CPD is required by staff, especially new staff, to ensure that pupils do not continue to make inadequate progress?
* Are staff adequately prepared and resourced to support low attainers?

**SEN provision**

* What is the provision for SEN in the school?
* Who is responsible for identifying and managing the needs of individual pupils and are they equipped to know which pupils are the low attainers within a given cohort?
* Have the right pupils been diagnosed with SEN and are they being monitored and supported effectively?

**Pupil wellbeing**

* What measures are taken to ensure that children are enjoying their learning, as well as making good educational progress?
* Are pupils who have historically shown low attainment being offered the right kind of personal support to make appropriate progress in their learning?

**Use of the pupil premium**

**EEF teaching and learning toolkit**

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is a charity dedicated to improving educational outcomes for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It has developed a teaching and learning toolkit, which evaluates strategies that schools can use both in and out of the classroom to improve attainment for disadvantaged pupils. Each strategy is evaluated in terms of its average impact, the strength of the research supporting it, and its cost.

[Teaching and learning toolkit, EEFhttps://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/teaching-learning-toolkit](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/teaching-learning-toolkit)

* How will the pupil premium be allocated for each eligible pupil?
* What kinds of interventions, that have been shown to be effective, are put in place due to the pupil premium?
* Who is responsible for ensuring that eligible pupils make adequate or appropriate progress?
* How can we ensure that pupil premiums are spent effectively, to the real benefit of the pupil?
* How will the impact of the pupil premium be monitored and assessed?

**Peer tutoring, collaborative learning and other peer-led support systems**

* How could other people help low attainers? In particular, peers, small groups, mentors, other teachers or staff
* What opportunities do low attainers have to access support from a range of people in school?
* What opportunities do pupils normally have to work with peers or collaboratively in class? How are low attainers and more able pupils enabled to work together?

**Diagnosis and monitoring of low attainment**

* How is low attainment identified, assessed and monitored? How has the move to assessment without levels impacted the school's ability to identify low attainers?
* How well-known are pupils to their teachers and how is low attainment kept track of by different teachers across a teaching team?
* How effectively do teachers report on low attainment to senior management, pupils and parents?

**Attendance and behaviour**

* What is the correlation between low attainment, attendance and behaviour?
* What attendance and behaviour policy is in place, and what happens if pupils contravene such a policy? Are the systems working?
* How far is poor attendance or behaviour due to low attainment, rather than the cause of it?

**Parental engagement**

* How well-versed are parents in their children’s attainment, especially if it is considered low?
* How does the school communicate with parents when their child’s low attainment is a concern?
* What are parents asked to do to help support their children and how well is this supported and monitored by the school?
* What kind of online support systems are in place to help families support a low attaining pupil?

**School resources**

* Is the school resourced to support pupils with low attainment, especially if those pupils need a different kind of teaching and learning experience to make good progress?
* Are there adequate allocations of time, space and human resource to make sure pupils are receiving the support they require?
* Are subject leaders or department heads considering the low attaining pupils specifically when they are resourcing their subject within the school?

Supporting less able pupils

It is the responsibility of the governing board to ensure that all pupils make good progress in their learning. Alice suggested that governors can find out a lot about how well low attainers are supported by carrying out some of the following activities. For each activity, we've listed couple of questions that governors might ask themselves.

**Visiting your school**

Governors can visit their school to see activities, exhibitions or performances by the pupils.

Questions:

* Are low attainers included in all activities?
* Are low attainers obvious, through streaming for instance?
* Are low attainers getting the right kind of opportunities and what do they think about the interventions they are offered?

The following article from The Key looks at [**visiting your school: guidance for governors**](file:///the-governing-body/visiting-your-school/visiting-your-school-guidance-for-governors/?marker=content-body&marker=content-body).

**Ensuring staff have access to CPD**

What professional development across the school is necessary for a consistent, thoughtful approach to low attaining pupils?

It is the headteacher’s responsibility to ensure that the school's teaching and support teams are well equipped and well-resourced to support low attaining pupils.

Questions:

* How does the school define 'outstanding' and are teachers given appropriate support to reach this target?
* What is being done to address inadequate teaching?
* What professional development across the school is necessary for a consistent, thoughtful approach to low attaining pupils?

**Including strategies for supporting low attainers in the SIP**

The school improvement plan (SIP) should include reference to pupils who are not making expected or good progress in their learning. It should also identify ways in which these pupils are being supported.

Questions:

* Where in the SDP is there reference to low attaining pupils and what interventions are necessary for them to make good progress in the future?
* How are these budgeted and planned for in the SDP and over what period of time?

Another article from The Key has examples of [**school improvement plans**.](file:///school-improvement-and-strategy/strategic-planning/school-improvement-planning/school-improvement-plans-guidance-and-templates/?marker=content-body&marker=content-body)

**Link governors addressing low attainment**

Link governors can ask subject leaders how they are addressing low attainment.

The Key has another article with examples of [**questions for governors to ask subject leaders**](file:///the-governing-body/roles-on-the-governing-body/link-governors/link-governors-questions-for-subject-leaders/?marker=content-body&marker=content-body).

**Adding low attainment as an agenda item for governor meetings**

Where appropriate and necessary, the question of low attainment can be added as a governing board agenda item.

Questions:

* How is low attainment being addressed this year?
* How successful were interventions last year and what is in place for the future to ensure low attaining pupils make expected or good progress in their learning?

Other considerations concerning low attainment

**Children being labelled as ‘low attainers’**

Alice advised that it is critical that pupils are treated with the greatest sensitivity, respect, confidentiality and care when they are considered ‘low attainers’. She said the self-fulfilling prophecy effect of pupils labelled as ‘low attainers’ is well-documented. Governors should take care to ensure absolute discretion around this subject, especially when in school.

Governors might also observe and comment on how the school deals with this possible labelling effect, especially where pupils are streamed for ability, or where pupils miss out on other parts of the curriculum when taken out for interventions.

**Effective tracking of long-term pupil progress**

The effective diagnosis of low attainment, and the effective monitoring of interventions to support low attaining pupils, are fundamental to overcoming low attainment.

How pupils are tracked and monitored throughout their time at school is key, so that no one pupil slips through the net. Effective pupil progress tracking measures should be in place at all schools. Senior leadership and governing bodies must ensure good, effective use of such systems.