



# Mind the gap

With the Pupil Premium, the government is helping narrow the attainment gap for the most disadvantaged children. But are schools spending the cash wisely, asks **Daniel Thomas**

It is one of the most tasking questions facing governments and schools: how to raise the attainment of the most disadvantaged pupils.

For the UK, the issue invokes a particular urgency. As former education secretary Michael Gove noted in 2010, few developed countries have as wide a gap between the highest and lowest achieving pupils. “Children from poorer backgrounds, who are currently doing less well at school, are falling further and further behind in the qualifications race every year,” he said.

The coalition is yet to solve the problem but has made a laudable start. In what must be one of its most sensible and progressive policies to date, it introduced the Pupil Premium in 2011, a policy

that allocates significant extra funding to be spent on pupils from low-income families in order to raise attainment.

Since then – and thanks largely to persistent pressure from the Liberal Democrats – the government has relaxed eligibility for the pupil premium grant (PPG) and in cash terms raised it precipitously, from £488 per pupil in 2011, to £1,300 per pupil at primary level and £935 at secondary this year. That doesn’t just amount to money thrown at a problem; early stage results showed that every pupil entitled to Pupil Premium funding in 2012 moved up by almost one grade – or an average of five points per subject – compared to the grade predicted for them.

Yet there have been criticisms, not

least of the government’s claim to be providing schools with “additional” money. Last year, the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that, due to a freeze on schools spending this parliament, in real terms the Pupil Premium had added just 1% to schools’ overall funding since its introduction.

The bigger issue, though, is that the cash is still not always spent well. An Ofsted report in 2012 found that only 10% of school leaders said the premium had changed the way they worked. And while the situation is said to be improving, in February 2013 the watchdog warned that some schools: “were still spending the pupil premium on interventions that were having little meaningful impact on eligible pupils’ achievement”.

‘Not a homogenous group’

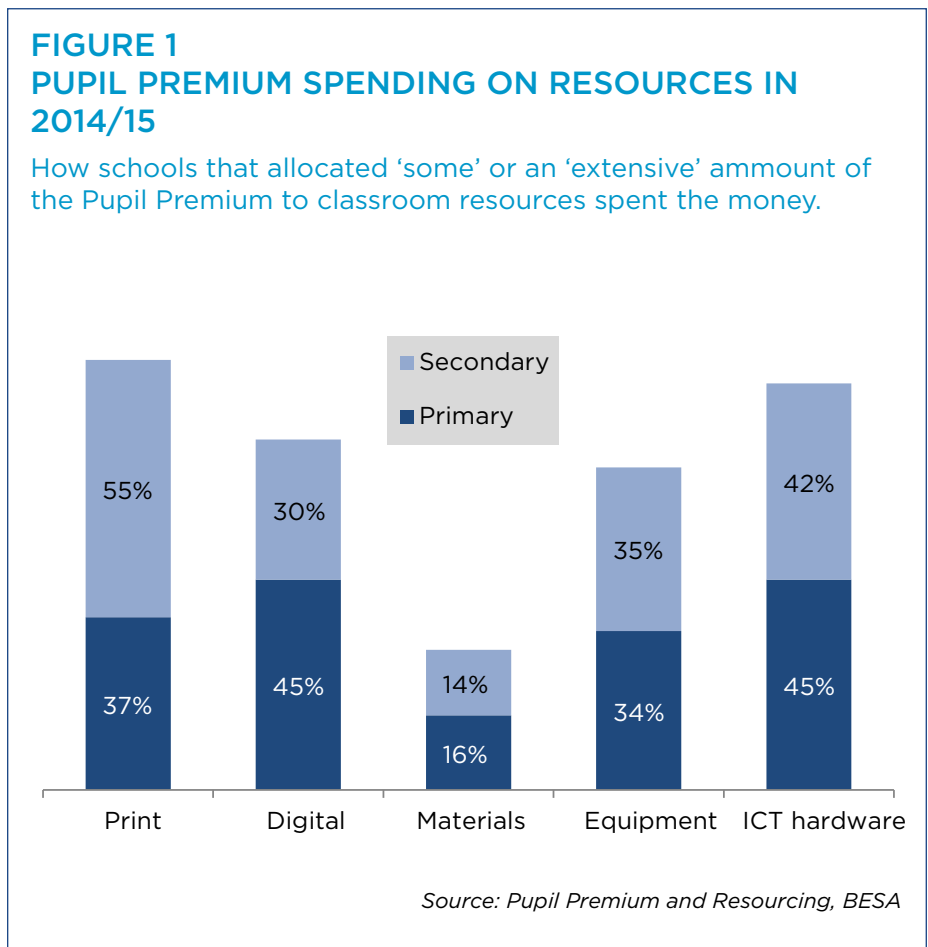
Spending the PPG effectively is not straightforward, not least because PPG students as a cohort aren’t straightforward. To qualify, a child must have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years or have been looked after continuously for more than six months. But, says Marc Rowland, deputy director of the National Education Trust, and author of a *Practical guide to the Pupil Premium*, Pupil Premium pupils are not a homogenous group.

“They can range from a child from a middle class family that has dropped into unemployment for a short while, to children living some of the most chaotic lives, like those with special educational needs or living in care.”

Not all recipients are low attainers either, he adds. “It may be that they’re doing very, very well, and that is where money spent on high quality teaching can benefit and stretch those children even more.”

Reflecting the Department for Education’s fondness for school autonomy, heads may spend the Pupil Premium in any way they see fit, as long as they can demonstrate it has improved outcomes. That can confuse some schools, but to help the DfE has signposted guidance from the Education Endowment Fund rating the impact of various ‘interventions’. Most useful, it suggests, are early years or early childhood interventions, improving learner feedback, and meta-cognitive and self-regulation strategies (sometimes known as ‘learning to learn’ strategies).

That said there are numerous other ‘guides’ to pupil premium spending, along with a general agreement that a one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t work. Among Ofsted’s top ‘gap busters’ are data tracking to identify attainment gaps, literacy support, and access to broad educational experiences such as competing in sporting events. For Rowland, though, promoting high quality teaching is usually most



effective. “From my research, what seems to be most effective is spending the money on continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers or even enabling them to have a bit more time for feedback and planning. Those are the things that benefit disadvantaged pupils disproportionately.”

Schools have anyway herded around certain solutions, and not always the most effective ones. According to Ofsted, the most frequent use of the funding is to pay for additional staff, including teachers and teaching assistants, who deliver one-to-one support and small group tuition.

But schools are branching out. Suppliers of products and services to schools tell *EducationInvestor* they have seen an increase in demand driven by Pupil Premium spending; in fact a hotly contested market appears to have emerged.

Tutoring is one area to have benefited. According to Graphite Capital-backed Explore Learning, schools can use their Pupil Premium allocation to fund membership to their high street centres. TLC Education Group, an online tutoring platform backed by 1886 Investments among others, says it’s had “enormous” pupil premium demand.

“Schools have found our online individualised interventions, with qualified teachers, especially useful due to the flexibility of delivery in times and subject. The one-on-one delivery enables the schools to target the skill gaps,” says founder Simon Barnes.

The British Educational Suppliers Association estimates that about 14% of the Pupil Premium in primary schools will be spent on classroom resources this year, and 15% in secondary schools. This could lead to expenditure of £276 million – up from £212 million in 2013/14.

**FIGURE 2**  
**CLASSROOM RESOURCE ALLOCATIONS FROM**  
**PUPIL PREMIUM 2014-15**

	None (%)	A little allocation (%)	Some allocation (%)	Extensive allocation (%)
<b>Primary schools</b>				
Reading books and printed materials	17	38	27	18
Digital content and software	17	35	36	12
Puzzles, games and art materials	41	44	15	0
Equipment	13	46	35	6
ICT hardware	40	24	21	15
Other	34	15	40	11
<b>Secondary schools</b>				
Reading books and printed materials	13	40	32	15
Digital content and software	37	28	29	6
Puzzles, games and art materials	54	34	12	0
Equipment	41	23	36	0
ICT hardware	19	28	41	12
Other	58	18	20	4

Source: Pupil Premium and Resourcing, BESA

► That’s a boon for publishers and equipment and assessment providers. But it’s important to remember that the products and services suited to PP spending have to be ‘measurable’, as all schools have to demonstrate how their spending has paid off and publish this information online. Making life harder for providers, though, some schools simply don’t measure very well, says Greg Watson, chief executive of GL Assessment. “There’s a stark divide between the schools who are critically evaluating the impact of their PPG spend and those who report on what they have done with little more than a subjective evaluation.”

In the worst case scenarios, schools end up wasting cash on useless or inappropriate things. Rowland notes how cash has been splurged on iPads, with little thought about how they

might improve attainment. Sutton Trust research in 2012 showed that some schools were using the PPG to plug existing budget deficits, and a report by *the Guardian* in October claimed schools still buy clothes, blankets and beds for their poorest students.

The flipside, though, is that schools, worried about making bad decisions, can lean towards interventions that are easy to measure, even when they’re less effective. Areas that can suffer include ‘soft skills’ development or school trips. Both are believed to aid overall attainment, but quantifying the link with attainment can be tough.

Watson says that while it may be harder to measure interventions with an “indirect impact”, a solution can always be found if a school is willing to try. That could involve asking pupils about their confidence before and after

an intervention, using feedback from teachers or surveying parents. Yet we are still a long way off a seamless system of measurement. “There are going to be limits on how you measure the effectiveness of a single intervention if a number of interventions are at play simultaneously. It’s going to take time and patience to pool enough research to make reliable judgments about what works where,” he says.

### ‘A risk of falling back’

According to Ofsted the picture is improving. In 2012, Sir Michael Wilshaw claimed the PPG was having little or no impact on the way half of schools “organise and manage their schools in relation to the use of money on poor children”. But last July, Ofsted said that most schools were now spending the

cash “effectively”.

More can clearly be done however. One issue is that, under pressure to deliver, some schools plough all of their PPG into year 11 students in the run-up to GCSE, or year 6 pupils before SATS. But such “quick fixes” won’t have a lasting effect, says Rowland. “What it usually does is get pupils over the accountability hurdle, but they haven’t got that real depth of understanding about the subject. Those disadvantaged students then tend to struggle again when they go into that new environment of secondary school. They’ve had a whole summer off without learning, so there’s a risk of falling back.”

What would it take to eradicate suboptimal PPG spending altogether, then? Some argue more guidance is needed, although remarkably not from the government. Naimish Gohil, founder of homework management tool Show My Homework, believes school heads should provide more examples of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ PPG spending. “This would give teachers across the school some form of framework that is easy to understand and I’m confident good ideas would stem from it.”

More collaboration between schools might also help, either through local partnerships or clusters, maybe with help from an academy trust or local authority. Governors could get more involved, too, challenging school leaders to make the most of the PPG.

“The other challenge is to improve the skills of schools and governing bodies in handling data such as assessment scores,” adds Watson. “Some academies and schools are strong here, but others, particularly smaller schools, can struggle to interrogate data. Initial teacher training and ongoing CPD should feature effective use of all forms of data.”

Overall, schools are still finding their feet when it comes to the Pupil Premium and bumps in the road are to be expected. Still the direction of travel is positive, and in March the policy was sensibly extended to cover three- and four-year-olds. When it comes to ‘busting’ the attainment gap the government has taken the bull by the horns and it should be praised for it. ■

