

Barriers and challenges faced by disadvantaged pupils in KESA

KESA is a fully comprehensive Academy and the barriers faced by disadvantaged pupils are varied. Being in receipt of disadvantaged funding is no indicator of ability nor does this set any limit on achievement. There is no such thing as a typical disadvantaged child and many have very supportive backgrounds and high ambitions.

However, Dunsford argues that common barriers to learning might include “poor parenting, limited access to language, poor literacy levels, poor attendance, low aspirations, low expectations, narrow experience of life outside school”² In his toolkit for schools in Cornwall he also adds “lack of sleep, poor nutrition, mental and physical health issues, poor social and other skills and a lack of self-confidence and self-esteem”⁴

Our analysis of the challenges faced by our own disadvantaged students included listening to pupils, shadowing pupils, book trawls, learning walks, talking to parents, staff and governors and data analysis of progress, attendance, behaviour and involvement in extra-curricular activities. The actions taken are designed to address these challenges.

1. Attendance

Students cannot learn if they are not at school and low attendance is a major barrier to achievement. Our analysis shows that our disadvantaged students are less likely to have good attendance. They are more likely to have time away from school. There is strong research evidence to suggest that “well-targeted support to improve attendance”¹ is an effective use of disadvantaged funding and we have strategies in place to address these.

2. Attitudes to learning

Students in receipt of disadvantaged funding are more likely to become passive or reluctant learners. Analysis of learning walks, student response to feedback and observations show that disadvantaged students are less likely to take risks with their learning and less likely to be resilient when responding to improvement targets. Students in receipt of disadvantaged funding are more likely to engage in off-task behaviours in lessons. They are also less likely to participate in trips, visits or other enrichment activities. They are less likely to initially volunteer for our student senates. This becomes more pronounced as students get older. Improvements have been noted in schools which “worked to improve pupils’ social and emotional skills where these are barriers to learning”¹ and this is why we have used some of the funding to support pastoral provision.

3. Aspiration and Ambition

Some disadvantaged students are less likely to have focused and ambitious career targets to work towards. They are less likely to have plans for post-16 study and often do not value education as a key to a more fulfilling life after school.

4. Teaching quality

No analysis of barriers to achievement could be complete without a continued focus on the quality of the teaching students receive. At the heart of our ethos is that we strive to improve and this applies just as much to teachers as their students. Dunsford argues that “There is solid evidence that poor teaching disproportionately disadvantages deprived children. Equally, evidence tells us that excellent teaching disproportionately benefits them. So high quality teaching must be at the core of all pupil premium work.”² For this reason, many of our disadvantaged achievement strategies have consistently focused on improving the quality of teaching, including setting arrangements, as a recurring theme. In designing this provision we are mindful of looking first at the strategies that make the most difference “feedback, metacognition, peer tutoring, etc”³

5. Curriculum

It has been argued that schools should “consider too how you can adapt the curriculum to benefit disadvantaged pupils.”² One size does not always fit all and students work best in subject they value. For some students this is best

served by traditional subjects within an academic pathway but for others a lack of a more vocational offer, either delivered at KESA or by our college partner, is barrier to achievement.

6. Resources

Disadvantaged students are less likely to travel on trips where there is a cost implication, purchase optional revision materials such as study guides, have a variety of reading books at home or buy specialist equipment such as sports equipment. As a result, they are less likely to take part in optional enrichment opportunities.

7. Difficulties of studying at home

Some disadvantaged students reported that home does not always provide the right learning environment for them either because of a lack of family engagement in education, not having a space to learn or because there are too many distractions at home.

8. Academic confidence and resilience

Teachers report that many of our disadvantaged students lack resilience when things did not go well and do not have the self-belief that is more common in non-disadvantaged pupils. They are far less likely to have family role models who have high academic achievement through hard work and determination.

9. Conduct

Our behaviour analysis shows that disadvantaged students at KESA are more likely to engage in both low level and more serious behaviour incidents. They are more likely to receive both fixed term and permanent exclusions. Teacher observations suggest that disadvantaged students are more likely to be negatively influenced by other students with poor behaviour; bad behaviour by a few key students can lead to worse behaviour by other around them. The impact of this has been lower attendance via FTEs and a failure to reach their academic potential.

1 The Pupil Premium: How schools are spending the funding successfully to maximise achievement, Ofsted

2 Ten-point plan for spending the pupil premium successfully, Dr John Dunford

3 Educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit

4 improving the life chances of disadvantaged young people in Cornwall, Dunsford, March 2017