

Growing Up in Poverty: Exploring the Education Gap



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Executive Summary

This report shares the findings of Buttle UK's research into the relationship between financial hardship and education for children and young people in 2025. The research aims to understand the impacts of poverty on access to education by amplifying the voice of households living through these experiences, including the direct voice of children and young people.

We invited recipients of Buttle UK Chances for Children grants – all of whom have experienced financial hardship – to take part in a survey. We received over 1,000 responses to our surveys including:

- 825 responses from parents and carers
- 53 responses from estranged young people aged 16-20
- 138 responses from children and young people aged 11-19.

Impact of poverty on capacity to learn

It was clear from both parents and carers and children and young people that poverty has a significant impact on children and young people's capacity to learn:

- 26% of parents and carers reported that poverty has a **severe** impact on their child's ability to keep up with age-related learning expectations
- 31% of parents and carers reported that poverty has a **severe** impact on their child's ability to learn at home
- 73% of children and young people reported that they feel behind with their learning compared to their peers
- 70% of children and young people reported that they find it hard to complete learning tasks at home.

A shocking **62% of parents and carers reported that their children's capacity to engage in learning is diminished due to hunger or tiredness; 55% of children and young people reported**

that they are sometimes too hungry to engage in education; and 81% reported that they are sometimes too tired to engage in education.



“You always worry about what to eat in the next mealtime and whether you'll have electricity to turn on the lights. Poverty affects your thinking capability” (child/young person)

There was evidence of poverty leading to children having low aspirations, feeling left out and socially isolated, being bullied and experiencing poor mental health.



“I don't have laptop to do the work for school, I don't have the right uniform and shoes, [and] bath soap and they always say I smell and laugh at me” (child/young person)

“If you are financially bad, no one will talk to you” (child/young person)



Missing resources

Parents and carers were asked which key educational resources were unaffordable for their household:

- 82% could not afford a laptop or tablet
- 69% could not afford school trips
- 61% could not afford extracurricular activities
- 60% could not afford school shoes
- 59% could not afford school uniform



“It’s hard not having enough money to buy 2 sets of uniform and having to wash them every night” (parent)

Parents and carers with three or more children were more likely to report that they could not afford almost every item listed, emphasising the cruel impact of the two-child limit on children from larger families.

Children and young people were asked to identify the top five items they felt they lacked:

- 66% identified laptops or tablets
- 59% identified school trips
- 40% identified extracurricular lessons
- 39% identified residentialials
- 37% identified school shoes.



“I worry about mum paying the rent and bills. I don’t like to ask for new trainers or shoes when I have grown out of the ones I have” (child/young person)

Children and young people do not have the critical items they need to engage in education, either to support their learning at home or to support their attendance at school. They do not get to take part in extracurricular activities and experiences that would support their wider development.

Attendance

The average attendance rating reported by parents and carers was 78%, a full 15 percentage points lower than the national average reported by the Department for Education for 2024-25. For parents, the impossible strain of paying for the uniforms, transport, trips, and most of all, learning resources, creates chasms which are filled by poor wellbeing, bullying, low self-confidence and hopelessness for their children. These factors hold children and young people back from attending and thriving in their education settings, which perpetuates the cycle.

The role of education settings

There was mixed feedback on the role of schools, colleges, and universities in providing support for children and young people in poverty. Fewer than half of parent carer respondents felt that their child’s setting has staff who understand the financial challenges they face (45%) or provides the full holistic support they need (42%). Some parents were emphatic in their praise for their children’s setting, telling us that they and their children felt safe and supported because of their empathy. Others felt that they lacked sympathy or care, pushing instead for higher attendance and increasing attainment above their child’s wellbeing.

One of the strongest themes from children and young people was the significant frustrations that young people experience when they get in trouble or difficulty at their setting due to their hardship. This was especially apparent for factors such as attendance, homework, and uniform. They wanted teachers and educators to know and understand the issues, to better support their specific challenges and provide more holistic care.

Summary

Over 1,000 respondents taught us that:

- **Children and young people do not have the critical items they need to access their education**, either to support their learning at home or to support their attendance at school and beyond. They do not get to take part in extra-curricular activities and experiences that would support their wider development.

- **Children and young people suffer huge impacts on their social, mental, and emotional wellbeing because of their financial hardship.**

This both causes, and is caused by, barriers to their education. These barriers are not always resource-focused; they encompass marginalisation, stigma, bullying, isolation, and mental health issues.

- Families living with financial hardship are susceptible to specific vulnerabilities which further widen the education gap. This includes high levels of absenteeism, increased likelihood of moving schools, and importantly, **unmet physiological needs of hunger and tiredness.**

- **Items that are required for learning, are particularly out of reach for larger families with three or more children.**

Recommendations

The findings in this report make for sobering reading. However, we also see room for change, including for wider systemic changes that could really make a difference.

It is clear from our findings that some families quite simply do not have sufficient income to enable their children to fully participate in and benefit from their education. The scale of the problems shared in this report highlight a fundamental crisis; a social security system that is failing to provide the very basics needed for children and young people to fully engage in education. Recent and forthcoming changes made by the Government - including the extension of free school meals to children of all households on Universal Credit, free breakfast clubs in every primary school in England and a limit on the number of branded school uniform items that schools can require - will help, but they do not

go far enough. As the most pressing priority, we urge the **Government** to:

- Lift the two-child limit and benefit cap.

Scrapping the two-child limit would mean an additional £3,000 per child, per year (beyond the first two children) for families with three or more children, and make a huge difference to supporting children's engagement in education.

We acknowledge that schools need additional resource to provide the mental health and wellbeing support that children and young people in poverty need. As such we support the Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition's call for the **Government** to commit to:

- The 100% rollout of Mental Health Support Teams by the end of this Parliament, to deliver on its commitment to provide a specialist mental health professional in every school.

- A fully resourced, national implementation programme to support every school, college, and university to adopt a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing.

This report also highlights the role that schools, colleges and universities can play in supporting children and young people in poverty. We therefore make the following recommendations for **education** settings:

- More training for education providers, on the experience, prevalence, challenges and impact of financial hardship for children and young people.

- Review policies such as uniform, attendance and homework policies, that serve to punish children and young people in financial hardship for factors outside of their control.

- Awareness raising for all students about the experiences and impact of financial hardship, to address stigma and bias.

- Provision or loan of laptops or tablets for children in low-income households.

INTRODUCTION

Context

Every year, Buttle UK makes a commitment to shining a light on the serious issues that families experiencing poverty and crisis are facing. In 2025, we pledged to research the challenges to education engagement and barriers to learning that children and young people are enduring, following our breakthrough Growing Up in Poverty report in 2024. The themes that that report explored – education, housing, mental health, relationships, isolation, and support services, to name a few - served as a stark reminder that while these issues are multiple and intertwined, each one has its own unique and traumatic implications for children and young people's lives.

Education is everything. From the role it has in the daily lived experience of childhood to the rippling impact that it has long into young adulthood and beyond, it is critical that every child has their rightful access, for their today and their tomorrow. Yet, evidence from our grant making and our research reports shows that prior to receiving a grant, children routinely go without essential items such as technology, books, school uniform, shoes, and transport. They are living with physiological challenges stemming from unmet food, warmth, and hygiene needs. They are also being condemned by a frontline support system which is struggling through underfunding and oversubscription. Education engagement is both impacted by, and has an impact on, these circumstances.

Aims

This report sets out to deeply explore education and financial hardship. It intends to name the main challenges that children and young people face in accessing their education, and the serious consequences of this. It will put numbers and proportions to education issues, highlighting where need is highest and the extent and reach of the challenges. Above all, it will elevate and **champion the voices of the families, young people and children** living in financial hardship, to provide an opportunity for them to directly report on what education is like for children and young people

today. This report will serve as their platform, reporting their words and their lived experience for the purposes of empowerment, not just narration.

The overall aims of this research can be summarised as:

- To undertake research directly with families to explore the relationship between extreme financial hardship and education for children and young people in 2025.
- To understand the impacts of poverty on access to learning opportunities, both in real terms and through associated experiences.
- To amplify the voice of households living through these experiences, including uplifting the direct voice of children and young people.
- To use the findings to improve our grants, support our fundraising, and provide insights to education settings.

Language

You will see the term **poverty** used throughout this report, alongside other formal phrasing such as **low-income** and **financial hardship**. However, we acknowledge the difference in how respondents self-identify, often talking about being **poor**, **struggling**, and **scraping by**, and we support the use of language that they identify with, which is why it is reflected in the write-up. For brevity, we tend to use the term **parent** across this report, but please note that this should be taken to mean both **parents and carers**. Likewise, as the age range of young respondents spans 11 – 19, they are referred to as **children and young people (CYP)**.

RESPONDENTS

Methodology

An invite to participate in a survey was extended to just under 7,000 recipients of Chances for Children grants, who had received a grant between April 2022 – April 2025. These included parents, carers, and young estranged people. Through their eligibility for and receipt of a Buttle UK grant, all of these respondents are known to be living in serious financial hardship with children living at home of education age.

For the first time ever, we invited children to take part in this piece of research. With great care to ensure complete diligence to all ethical considerations and informed consent, we created a unique survey for those aged 11 to 19 years old. Parents and carers were invited to share this invitation with eligible children in their household after themselves giving informed consent.

We received over **1,000 responses**. The rates for each of the different groups were:

- 825 responses from parents and carers
- 53 responses from estranged young people aged 16-20¹
- 138 responses from children and young people aged 11-19.

The latter two groups received the same survey, as they are all in education and the questions were geared towards understanding their experiences of this. The parent and carer survey focused a little more on the financial and material challenges of supporting dependents through their education.

Household characteristics

To support a meaningful understanding of the issues faced by families in different education stages, locations and household circumstances, we collected a few key measures, largely in the parent survey, about the characteristics of the households responding to our survey.

Nation	%
England	86%
Northern Ireland	4%
Scotland	6%
Wales	4%
Total	100%

Proportional to the populations of each nation, we received slightly above average response rates from England and Northern Ireland, but still a fairly even spread relative to the UK nations. Across England itself, the spread by region was representative of the population that Buttle UK serves, which slightly overrepresents the West Midlands and underrepresents the East of England, but otherwise almost exactly mirrors the population proportions in each region.

Number of children per household	%
1	29%
2	36%
3	20%
4	9%
5	4%
6	1%
7	0.3%
Total	100%

For this study, recognising the number of children per household offers us important insights into the pressures that families of different sizes might face, particularly those supporting multiple children in different education stages. Over 35% of respondents had households with 3 or more children. Our research frequently focuses on this figure in response to concerns about the two-child limit and its relationship with poverty, and it is considered throughout this report.

Finally, we asked parents and carers about the education settings that their children were attending at the time of their survey. Naturally, there was significant overlap, and many households had children across multiple educational stages. Approximately two-thirds of families had at least one child in primary education, and just over half had at least one in secondary education. With the exception of households with children in higher education, the spread showed excellent representation across education stage for the purposes of this research.

Education stage of dependents (parent carer survey)	Count of respondents	% of respondents
Early Years education (Nursery, Pre-school)	227	28%
Primary Education (Reception - Year 6)	553	67%
Secondary Education (Year 7 - Year 11)	417	51%
Further Education (College, 6th-Form)	105	13%
Higher Education (University, degree-level)	12	1%

We asked the same question of all participants who responded to the young people survey. It is excellent to see direct representation of those in varied key stages. Well over a third attend post-secondary education.

Education stage (children and young people survey)	No. of respondents	% of respondents
Secondary Education (Year 7 - Year 11)	119	62%
Further Education (College, 6th-Form, Apprenticeship)	53	27%
Higher Education (University, degree-level)	19	10%
	191	100%



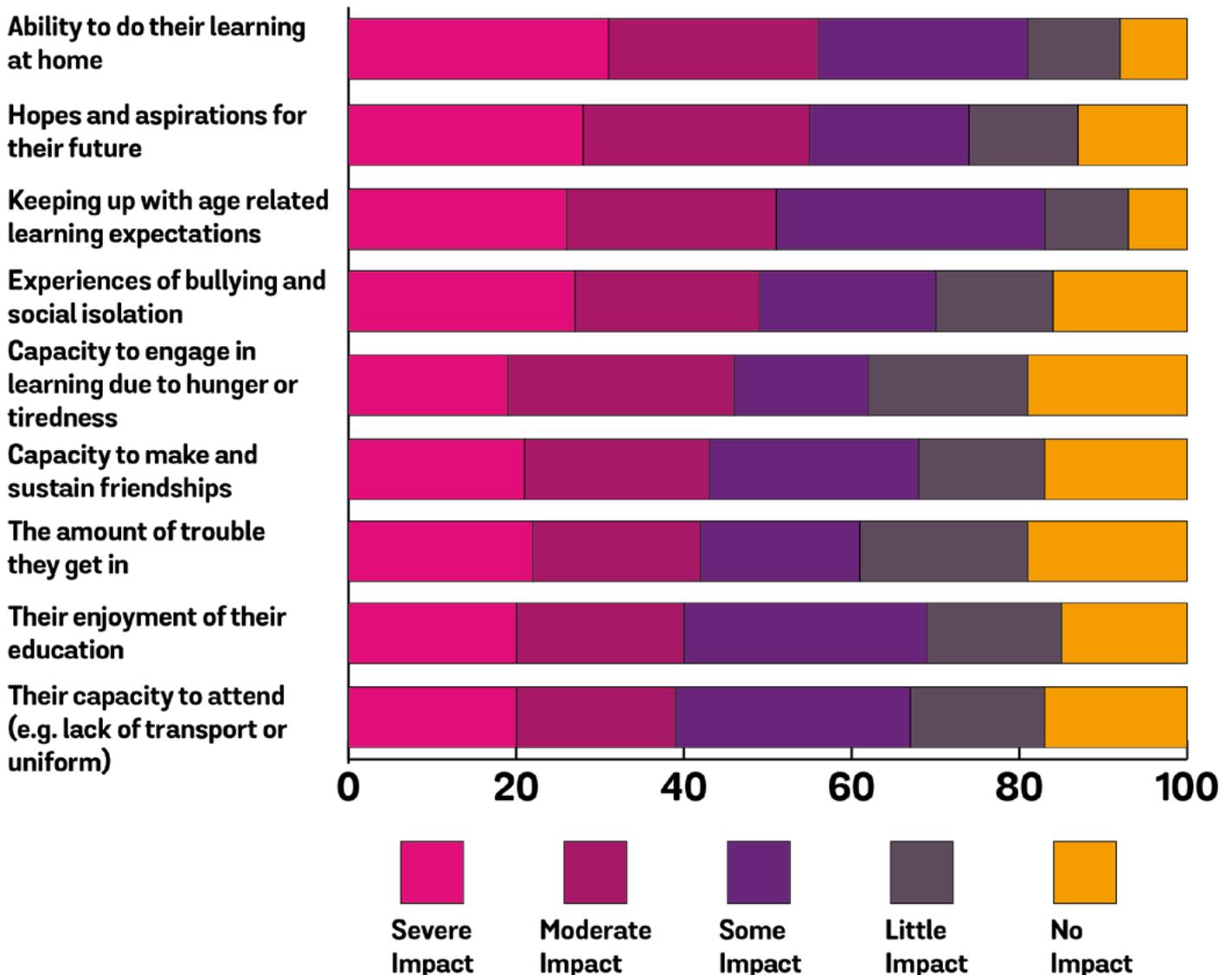
THE CHALLENGES

Key Issues

The first question we posed to parents was designed to help us capture the relationship they perceive between poverty and education. The chart below paints an extraordinary picture of the immense challenges they experience. Across each statement posed, the proportion reporting that there was no impact never climbed above a fifth of respondents, falling as low as 7% for children’s capacity to keep up with age-related learning expectations. Clearly, there are significant difficulties caused by poverty.

The spread of their responses highlights key issues. Looking at the factors that received the highest severe impact rating, 26% told us that poverty has a severe impact on their learning, 27% reported that it has a severe impact on their children’s experiences of bullying, while 28% reported the same for their loss of hopes and aspirations. Almost a third indicated that poverty was having a severe impact on their children’s ability to learn at home. These are critical factors in the likelihood of success in lifelong outcomes, attainment, and wellbeing. It is particularly sad to see such a high proportion experiencing such a significant impact on their dreams and ambitions. When widening the margins to include responses that capture some impact to severe impact, we still

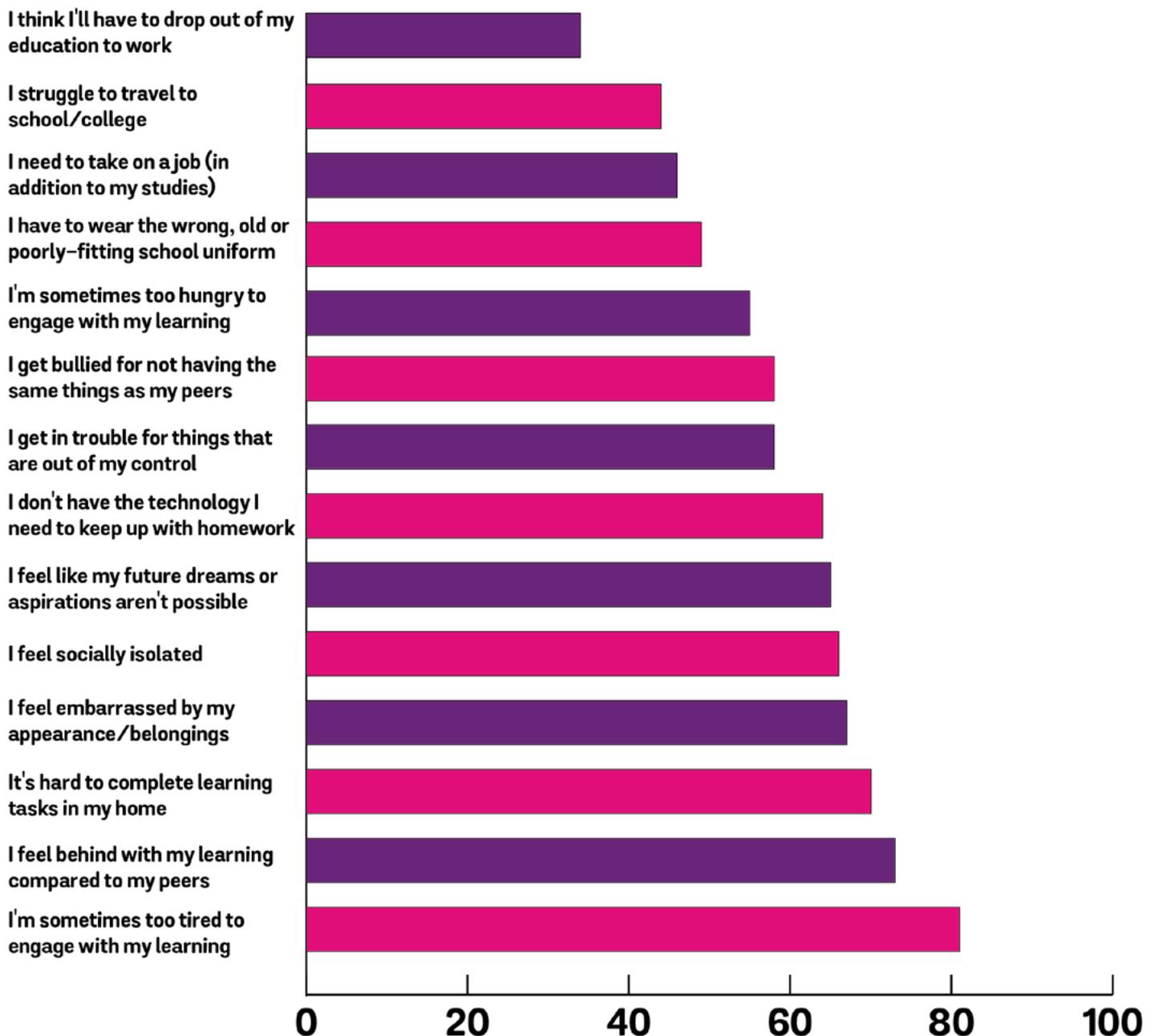
The Impact of poverty on education



see children's ability to keep up with age-related learning expectations as the most serious concern for parents and carers. However, when accounting for these wider brackets, two more concerns linked to poverty emerge; children's enjoyment of their education was impacted to at least some extent for 69%, and their capacity to make and sustain friendships at 68%, both crucial measures of wellbeing and happiness. Meanwhile, by the same measure, a shocking 62% of parents and carers report that their children's capacity to engage is diminished by hunger and tiredness. The picture is very bleak.

We asked children to rate a series of statements related to these impacts. The chart below demonstrates the proportions who felt they had encountered these issues. Almost three-quarters of young respondents felt behind with their learning, with 70% finding it challenging to learn at home. Sadly, two-thirds reported feeling embarrassed (67%) and socially isolated (66%) by their experiences of poverty. These are very serious and harmful experiences, with rippling effects to well-being and educational engagement explored across this report.

Child experiences of poverty and education



Like the concerns of their parents and carers, a high proportion (65%) of child respondents reported that they felt their dreams and aspirations weren't possible because of the financial hardship they face, with another 58% experiencing bullying because of their situation. On a physiological level, over half felt that hunger was impacting their engagement, while 81% felt that tiredness was holding back their learning – the highest rated factor of all. In 2024-25, Buttle UK awarded grants for 1,761 beds, the sixth most frequently awarded item, emphasising the very real issue of bed poverty.

The extent to which age and stage has a role in the impact of poverty on education was explored by filtering responses by the educational key stage the respondent was in. This showed interesting patterns, indicating where some impacts are felt at particular stages, and more pressingly for some than others. For secondary school students, these can be summarised as:

- **71%** were vulnerable to not owning the technology they needed to participate in their learning, much higher than any other age group, which may speak to issues around delivery of learning and how it excludes children at a critical point in their education.
- **65%** told us that they were experiencing bullying, 7 percentage points higher than the average for all young respondents, indicating that secondary schools may be a particularly challenging space for vulnerable children.
- **66%** reported that they were experiencing trouble at their education setting for factors out of their control, such as not having the right uniform or not being able to complete their homework. This indicates that some issues related to poverty are not well-supported in secondary settings.

For further education students and higher education students, the factors they reported the most were slightly different. These can be summarised as:

- **68%** of further education students reported that not having enough food for learning was a key issue, 13 percentage points higher than the cohort as a whole.

- They were also the group most vulnerable to dropping out of their education, with **43%** sharing that this was a risk.

- They were also much more likely to report that they needed to sustain a job to afford to continue their studies (**64%**), a factor which rose to **83%** of higher education respondents.

- **98%** of higher education students frequently reported on tiredness as a significant factor in their education as well as very high proportions feeling socially isolated (**95%**).

What this tells us is myriad; firstly, some of the gaps that start in secondary education appear to widen as children try to sustain their education into young adulthood, with work and employment playing a part in the worsening of physiological and social factors into further and higher education. Meanwhile, for children still in their secondary education, they are particularly vulnerable to peer factors, such as bullying, and unmet resource needs, which results in them not having what they need to learn and then getting into trouble for it too. Overall, these are hugely important insights into what matters for children and young people in their education and combined with the insights offered by their parents and carers, **there are very clear vulnerabilities and barriers for children and young people in poverty.**

Interestingly, every individual challenge caused by financial hardship was described as a factor in holding back learning. It is therefore impossible to write an individual chapter based on learning underachievement on its own, as it does not exist in isolation. It exists both as cause-and-effect for worsening, or being worsened by, the impacts of poverty. Therefore, throughout the themes that this report explores, please consider how unmet learning potential underpins them all.

Aspirations

The way that children describe the lived experience of losing hope due to limited learning is powerful. Their words articulate the frustration and humiliation of feeling behind their peers because of factors outside of their control. They told us that their grades suffer because of the severe lack of resources, repeatedly using phrases like ‘falling behind’, ‘not keeping up’, and ‘at a disadvantage’. Many respondents compared themselves to their peers in multiple ways, but particularly their sadness and frustrations at not being able to keep up academically. This has huge implications for their learning today, and the knock-on effect on their future, which many naturally linked.

Many highlight the fears that they won’t realise their dreams because of the financial hardship they are experiencing. There were allusions to feeling caged in by their lack of opportunities, with descriptions of having to limit their ambitions and rein in specific plans to suit the circumstances they live with. This impacted the types of courses or settings they could apply for, forcing choices based on need rather than enjoyment or desire. We heard from young people who told us that they wanted to be police officers, paramedics, chefs, doctors, and criminal barristers. They told us that there was little or no way for them to continue on to further or higher education to achieve their dreams.



“I feel different because they are all clever and I’m not, it makes feel really upset” (CYP)

“I worry a lot about my future goals and dreams as I don’t see how I can make it as an adult, without having to read, write, calculate because I’m struggling in all that. I forget things I have been told, very easily” (CYP)

“I struggle to sleep at night and this affects my day-to-day learning. I don’t see me meeting my targets in the future to get a good job” (CYP)

“The level of my knowledge makes me feel different from peers at school. I am shy to give answers at school as I am always not sure if I will get them right” (CYP)



“The costs to get my dream is too high” (CYP)

“I feel I have missed so much of my education that my future seems utterly hopeless” (CYP)

“It shapes the way I see myself and my capabilities, so I’ve learnt to dream more realistically, to dream of things that mean I can survive, like a steady job rather than a dream in the arts” (CYP)

“I’m always thinking about how to make money, not what I actually want to do” (CYP)

“It makes me feel like I won’t succeed in comparison to my peers. There is a lot of fear of going into higher education due to the financial struggles I will face. I don’t want to feel poor forever” (CYP)

Stigma and peer relationships

There is enormous stigma attached to financial hardship. Parents highlight the particular stigmas attached to their living situations, such as single parenthood and poor home conditions, as well as how entitlement to key financial supports single their children out without affording them discretion. This creates and widens gaps that play out in education settings for vulnerable young people, impacting on perceptions of their capabilities and character.



“I feel like they’ve been branded as disadvantaged and therefore not capable which is totally untrue” (parent)

“The challenge of fitting in with their peers is huge. They don’t want their friends to know that we use food banks, or the uniform bank, or have to access funding to attend school trips...this could be more discreet for the children’s anxiety and bullying” (parent)

“As children get older, they do not like other students knowing they receive free meals...[my children] have not eaten their free meals since year 10 due to the free meal service not being private at school” (parent)

Children reflected these concerns in their own responses. Many feel the burden of the stigma as something to hide or overcome. Words they use attribute it to making them feel a lack of belonging, humiliation, and deep self-consciousness. Perceptions of feeling out of place were linked to lacking the items and opportunities afforded to their peers, and frustrations at needing more support than others. This has rippling effects on their experiences of schooling and education, particularly their self-confidence.



“I don’t have the same opportunities as others...I work hard at my studies so the teachers don’t single me out coming from a single parent household... it also makes me feel like I’m looked at differently” (CYP)

“I kind of feel embarrassed but I know it’s not my fault though it’s not easy to ignore” (CYP)

“I feel left out and withdrawn, I don’t like the idea of missing out just because we can’t afford something” (CYP)

In turn, these experiences isolate them further from their peers. Friendships are harder to gain and maintain, particularly where perceptions of self-worth are tied to owning particular resources or branded items. This leaves young people without support networks or social bonding within their education settings. Heartbreakingly, one child simply told us ‘I have no school friends’, while another told us that they feel they are ‘not included’. Meanwhile, those with friends are still held back by the barriers created by unmet need, diminishing the strength of these friendships and the positive role they could play.



“I feel like everyone can tell that I come from a rough background and they don’t want to be my friend because of it” (CYP)

“Because I lack the stuff that I need, I lack friends to learn in a group due to not having what they have” (CYP)

Bullying

The prevalence of bullying as a reported impact for children living with poverty is highly concerning. With 58% of young respondents directly reporting that they have experienced bullying and 84% of parents reporting at least some level of bullying and social isolation due to financial hardship, bullying is a very serious issue for children in poverty. This is reflected in the frequency with which it was reported in open-text responses. Parents described their children being bullied for being behind in their learning, lacking equipment or uniform, having unwashed or old clothing – all factors that they attribute to living in poverty.

The impacts are enormous. Children are unable to settle at or enjoy their education settings, with some physically hiding and isolating themselves. For others, the relentless bullying leads to complete school refusal. This leaves children in an even more precarious position, given the challenges with purchasing entirely new uniform if moving to a new school, or worse, the lack of resources at home to learn in the interim. Parents experience stress, frustration, and fear because they see and know the long-term impacts of these experiences on their children's learning and wellbeing.



“It’s so frustrating seeing my children cry and not willing to go to school because of poverty hardship...[my son] has been mocked, bullied and disgraced in school by friends and staff” (parent)

“My son had to leave school due to severe bullying. I cannot afford a tutor for him, so he is not studying for any exams due to cost” (parent)

Extensive responses from young respondents illustrate the lived experience of this bullying. They face name-calling, teasing and insults because of their financial circumstances. Some told us that they were keen to play down that they are poor, with several responses indicating that they kept their circumstances completely hidden because

of shame and fear of inciting bullying. Words such as ‘inferior’, ‘less than’ and ‘embarrassed’ capture the impacts of hurtful treatment by their peers, and how this shapes their self-identity.



“I don’t have laptop to do the work for school, I don’t have the right uniform and shoes, [and] bath soap and they always say I smell and laugh at me” (CYP)

“The other children are horrible to me and they make me feel sad, I find it hard to concentrate when I’m sad” (CYP)

For some, their experience of bullying takes the form of exclusion, which they report is used to torment them because of their circumstances. This leaves them increasingly isolated and shunned within their education setting. Feeling different from others was a particularly common complaint, leading to uncertainty about their own self-worth. The impacts on their enjoyment of their education and feelings about attending were highly negative, with young people mirroring feedback from parents – many simply do not want to go, some to the extent that they don’t feel able to.



“I feel like I miss out and struggle to make friends. I get bullied a lot” (CYP)

“I feel different because people don’t socialise with me” (CYP)

“I feel different because they say we have, you don’t. Makes me sad” (CYP)

“If you are financially bad, no one will talk to you” (CYP)

Mental health

The challenges of enduring the factors explored here have serious repercussions on the mental health of respondents. Many parents report significant stress for their children and themselves, as they collectively endure the mental strain of practical and emotional barriers to their education. One challenge appears to be balancing feelings of hopelessness against the constraints around being able to act; several parents told us that they were helpless, and this leaves their children in a situation where education can seem pointless. This is particularly so where they cannot engage, especially where the mental strain of poverty has become bad enough to widen the gaps they are already enduring.

One of the reasons that education settings create particular strain on mental wellbeing is because they serve as a place of constant comparison against peers. Young respondents reported experiences of jealousy, resentment and depression, witnessing how easily their friends and peers appear to succeed compared to them. This is detrimental to their hopes and feelings about their own capacity to succeed. The erosion of their resilience creates worry and anxiety, which in turn creates a learning environment where they are less likely to thrive. Many young people's responses clearly expressed feelings of hopelessness.



“[My children suffer from] low motivation, difficulty seeing the bright side of life, low hopes for the future” (parent)

“It has made my children suffer low self-esteem and it's mentally draining for me not to be able to provide the type of life they deserve” (parent)

“It's sad to talk to the children that my financial situation all the time and I'm worried they will remember their poor childhood memories when they grow up” (parent)

“My eldest who's at college has suffered severe bullying throughout school, and lacks in confidence due to being autistic, and not having the up-to-date clothing” (parent)



“It does have an impact on my future and dreams...I struggle with mainstream classes. I have anxiety and have been bullied. I feel like I have been let down in school, [they're] not helping me and I feel like I'm never good enough” (CYP)

“I'm permanently mentally exhausted from worrying all the time” (CYP)

“I wish others understood the stress and anxiety [that] financial hardship causes, making it harder to focus on education and participate in activities.” (CYP)

“Sometimes I feel like just giving up because I don't have anyone who can help me when I'm financially struggling and that due to my circumstances, I don't deserve it” (CYP)

Hunger and rest

81% of parents and carers told us that hunger and tiredness caused by poverty was having some level of impact on their children's capacity to engage in their education. Similarly, 4 in 5 young respondents told us that tiredness was a significant factor holding them back in their education, while over half reported the same for hunger. These demonstrate that basic physiological needs are not being met for young learners living in poverty, despite parents sacrificing whatever they can to help their children best engage with their education. These unmet needs set an unsteady foundation for the optimal concentration and effort that learning requires, let alone the mindset required to allow learning to be seen as a priority.

Hunger is rampant. Notwithstanding positive references to the support that free school meals offer, many families told us that it isn't enough, leaving their children frequently going hungry; this was particularly true for older children in secondary and further education. Poor home conditions further exacerbate hunger by reducing rest, because so many families are enduring overcrowding and a lack of beds; we see this raised repeatedly across our reporting. Parents and young respondents alike referred to it in the survey as a major factor in their capacity to engage in education.



“Hardship affects your ability to function or complete your schoolwork. You always worry about what to eat in the next mealtime and whether you'll have electricity to turn on the lights. Poverty affects your thinking capability” (CYP)

“Children in poverty are too worried about basic needs being met than thinking about education” (parent)

“Every morning the kids are tired falling asleep on the bus and in class it's effecting them physically and mentally” (parent)

“Having an old mattress I think has an impact on my quality of sleep which affects my ability to learn sometimes, and feeling different makes me feel anxious” (CYP)



“I often find myself choosing between food and clothing, skipping meals, saying that I am not hungry or simply have less in my plate just so I make sure kids are fed for school” (parent)

“[We need] larger school meals as my children are absolutely starving, [and] vouchers for half term for everyone – food, supermarkets” (parent)

“Sometimes I struggle to buy food when I'm at college. As a result of that I can't focus as much on my work [or] be as productive as I can be so it can cause me to fall behind” (CYP)

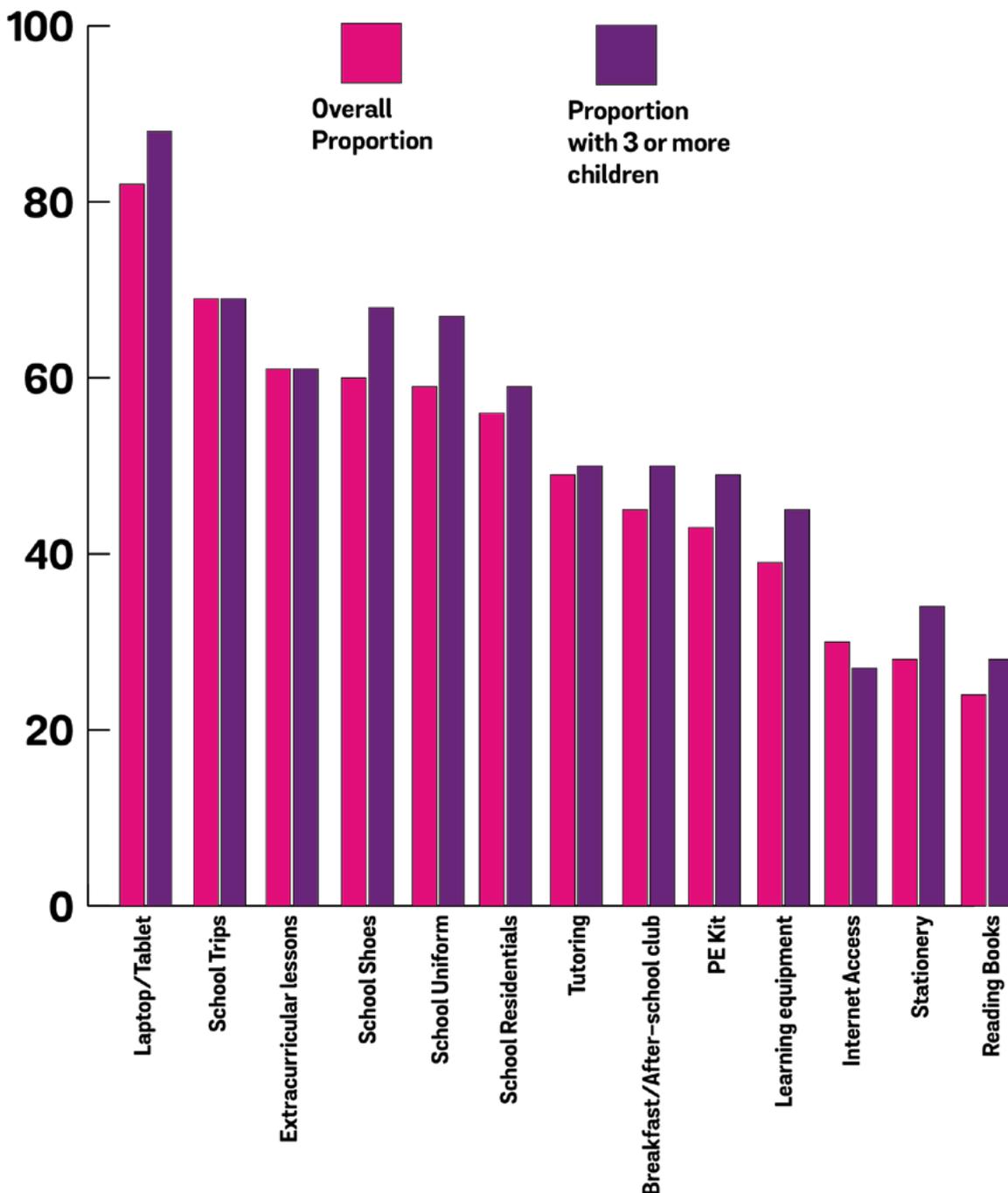
“Sometimes I can be angry because I haven't eaten much or had enough sleep” (CYP)

THE MISSING RESOURCES

Parent's Perspectives

Having explored the impact of poverty on education, it is important to understand exactly which items and activities, or the lack of them, are at the root of these issues captured so far. The second question we posed to parents and carers asked them to tell us which key educational resources their household could not access. The chart below shows the proportions who reported that they could not afford each item, with an additional split to show where larger families are particularly vulnerable. On the latter, it is very clear that access to key items is almost uniformly negatively impacted for parents with 3 or more children, providing more evidence of the vulnerabilities that are exacerbated by the two-child limit.

Inability to access key items



Although it is unsurprising to see fairly expensive items such as laptops, school trips and extracurricular lessons topping the list, it is highly concerning. Laptops and tablets are absolutely critical learning items. In an increasingly digital society, particularly post-pandemic, they are an essential requirement for access to learning apps, homework and research skills. Yet, 4 in every 5 respondents told us that they could not afford them for their children, rising to almost 9 out of 10 large families. Their written responses highlighted the pressure and dread they feel, knowing that their children are missing out on learning, but being helpless to do anything about it.

The high proportions reporting that they cannot afford school trips (69%) and extracurricular lessons (61%) were even more vocal in their written feedback. Parents recognise that these activities offer huge enrichment, so their loss is not only felt sorely by their children, but also in their own awareness of the opportunities that their children lose out on. The responsibility of this appears as a burden to the parents, who describe feelings of sadness, stress, and anxiety about their incapacity to provide much-wanted experiences, as well as their fears for their children's wellbeing and development.



“School trips are an extravagance that we can't afford but we must find the money anyway. Who allows their children to go without these things? So we shave off our already stretched budget...it feels never ending” (parent)

“I am doing my best, but sometimes it feels like they are missing out on important opportunities because I cannot always afford learning trips, or extra activities that help their development and confidence” (parent)

Around 60% of respondents told us that they cannot afford school uniform and shoes, rising to two-thirds of large families. This is an enormous issue. Unlike laptops, which support learning, and activities, which support enrichment, having the correct clothing and shoes provides access. The extent of this issue is perhaps understated to audiences without an awareness of child poverty. Many families are much more vulnerable to their child outgrowing or damaging their uniform, or even simply dirtying it, because the cost of washing or replacing it is out of reach. Their responses overwhelmingly describe the expense of these items, particularly blazers, rule-adhering shoes, and even, conversely, non-uniform days. The consequences on the household expenditure and labour, and children's comfort, are extreme.



“The kids have outgrown their uniforms and I can't even afford to buy more. Things have been so difficult, my daughter's birthday is approaching and I haven't even been able to get her anything” (parent)

“I can't afford school shoes for my daughter. She's still wearing her winter boots [in summer]” (parent)

“It's hard not having enough money to buy 2 sets of uniform and having to wash them every night” (parent)

“I have become the master of finding cheaper ways to provide uniform and buying second hand uniform...non-uniform days fill me with dread, I have to find a trendy previously unworn outfit and have to pay for the pleasure” (parent)

In the interests of transparency, there was one key 'item' that our survey overlooked in this question. It relates to travel to education settings, including travel passes for older children and support with transport for younger children. In the space parents were given to expand on what they felt they were missing that was having the biggest impact on education, many spoke about their child's incapacity to actually reach their settings due to travel expenses. The issues stem from the large proportion of the household budget that transport costs eat up, which leaves some parents with the difficult choice of not sending their child at all, or desperate for support to do so.



“My children arrive late to school every day as we have to catch 3 buses as we have moved further away out of a safe house” (parent)

“Transport is £20/week, which is a huge chunk of my monthly money to get her to school” (parent)

“Traveling to school by train and not getting no help for it, is very expensive. My children have to get up early just to get to school on time because of distance” (parent)

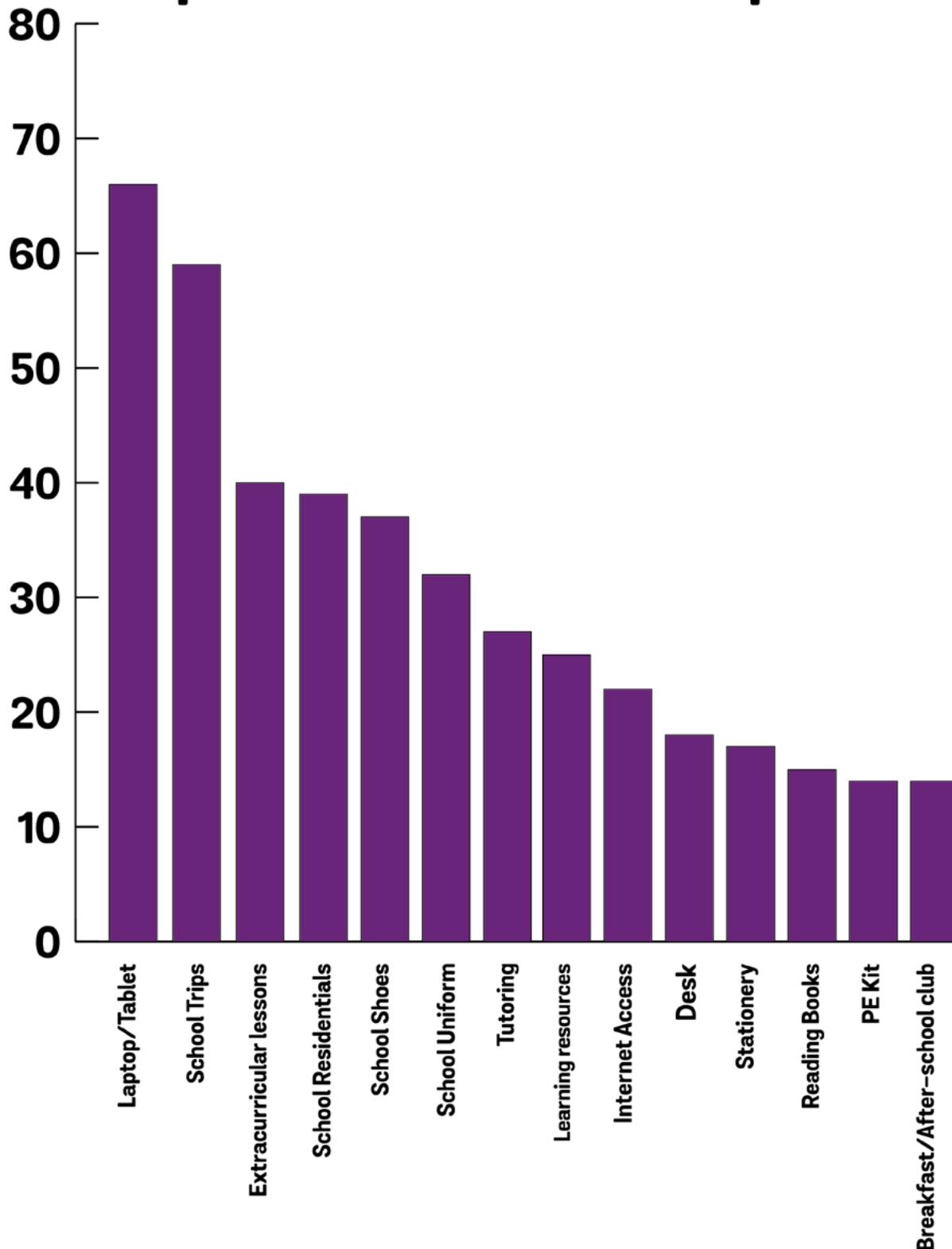
A key theme that arose from asking this question is the role of the education setting itself in overcoming or exacerbating the challenges outlined here. The spread and depth of these responses warranted a deeper analysis and are presented in a later chapter.



Children and Young People's Perspectives

We posed the same set of questions to our younger participants, this time asking them to rank the top five items they felt they lacked. This helps to better understand the items of most importance to children and young people, rather than simply ascertaining the unaffordability. Interestingly, children's responses mirrored that of the parent survey, which illuminates that most of the items that parents cannot afford are also the ones that children desire the most. This creates incredible strain on family relationships and overall happiness.

Proportion allocation top 5 ranking



Two-thirds of young respondents told us that they considered laptops and tablets one of the key items they miss out on, as well as 40% reporting that missing extracurricular lessons is one of the most important activities they lack. This creates disparities in their capacity to complete work tasks, with many reporting on the tiring or frustrating workarounds that they have to undertake, such as extended stays at school or to libraries to complete learning tasks. Young respondents told us how much they feel they miss out on learning exciting or diverse skills, such as sports and music, which they find disappointing and depressing. This was frequently linked to their diminishing hopes and dreams for their future, as well as setting them apart from their peers.



“I don’t have the latest technology or a printer to easier complete my work and I get bullied a lot as my mom can’t afford the coat and trainers everyone else wears at school” (CYP)

“It makes me feel a little left out. I don’t own anything as nice as [peers] do in terms of tech and what I do own feels outdated” (CYP)

“I think I could have a better education if I had resources to learn better but as things are too expensive there isn’t spare money to buy things” (CYP)

“It does impact my future because it difficult to be able to afford all the materials I need to get a head start” (CYP)

School uniform and school shoes (and equivalent for further and higher education students) were some of the items that young respondents talked about most, with 32% and 37% respectively ranking them in their top five lacking items.

This is perhaps because these are some of the most visible items when they are incorrect, ill-fitting, or in poor condition, leading to humiliation and poor self-confidence. This is particularly acute when their clothing does not abide by school rules around uniform, which can lead to trouble and even exclusion. This feeds into the anxieties they have about appearing different or less than their peers and increases their exposure to bullying.



“I have my brother’s old uniform and I’m a girl” (CYP)

“I have to make do with what I have even if my bag is torn or my clothes are old. It makes me feel a bit left out or less confident at times” (CYP)

“I’m not able to get to college all the time and my clothes don’t fit me enough, so I get embarrassed about going” (CYP)

“I don’t have shoes, every time they break I wait for my mum to be able to afford them” (CYP)

Importantly, the experience of missing many of these key items was linked to strong impacts on mental health and wellbeing, beyond the anxiety and depression that has been evident so far. These feelings can be described as ranging between jealousy, sadness, resentment, isolation, and anger. Children and young people are not to blame for these feelings, especially given their maturity and emotional development. It is quite clear that these experiences exacerbate frustrations and decreased motivations around education, and the feeling that there is little point in trying at all.



“Everyone around me is loaded, I feel sometimes angry that I’ll never have the childhoods they did, and angry at a system that let my mum struggle as a disabled single parent” (CYP)

“It makes me sick and sad really cause of the way I dress and go about, they all have new stuff and I don’t” (CYP)

“I want them to stop rubbing it in my face that I have bad shoes and not kickers like them and let them understand that it’s not nice to make someone feel so sad about shoes” (CYP)

“It is very hard to learn when your family is struggling with food and everyday living. When you just stay in the house all day. It is very boring” (CYP)

For some young respondents, a challenging aspect of missing key educational resources is the difficulties it causes at home. Many have a strong awareness of their family’s financial precarity and a desire to protect their parent, or themselves, from the hardships that their education settings cause. Knowing that an upcoming trip or broken item may cause conflict sees young people worrying and withdrawing further. This is a key example of where the collision of education and poverty creates much wider negative impacts for the families experiencing them, particularly where it challenges the already high levels of stress and strained relationships in the home.



“I worry when there are any letters sent home and asks my mam for money for me to be part of whatever is going to happen as she only gets her money once a month...[she] has nothing left to buy food or give me my bus fare for school if it is cold or raining” (CYP)

“It’s hard knowing my mum struggles to afford most things for me and then she gets angry with me when I lose or accidentally damage things then she refuses to replace them. But I don’t mean to lose or damage stuff sometimes it’s not even my fault” (CYP)

“I worry about mum paying the rent and bills. I don’t like to ask for new trainers or shoes when I have grown out of the ones I have” (CYP)

“It’s not just about not being able to afford nice clothes or the latest tech, it’s also about the mental burden that comes with worrying about whether or not I can afford food, what I can do to save as much as possible” (CYP)

ATTENDANCE

Absence

Educational success and engagement are linked strongly to attendance. Yet, attendance is weakened by factors that this report has explored. We wanted to understand the extent of this for families living in financial hardship, so we asked parents directly about their child's attendance to compare to national attendance figures available for those in compulsory schooling (5–15-year-olds).

The results are alarming. The **average attendance rating** reported by parents and carers was **78%**, a full **15 percentage points** lower than the national average reported by the Department for Education for the 2024-25 academic year to date².

Attendance	%
All	78%
EYFS	80%
Primary	83%
Secondary	74%
Further and Higher	76%
Higher	71%
National Average	93.2%

Attendance	% of respondents
≤20%	7%
≤40%	10%
≤60%	17%
≤80%	40%
≤90%	69%

While we acknowledge that some of our data pertains to students outside of compulsory education age, we also recognise that high levels of absenteeism are not unimportant for those in Early Years education, nor those in post-secondary education. Secondary school pupils were some of the most vulnerable in our survey cohort, with an average 74% attendance, almost 20 percentage points lower than the national average. Even primary school pupils, with the highest average attendance of 83% in this cohort, are missing an average of almost one day a week.

The Department for Education describes persistent

absence as pupils who consistently miss 10% or more of their sessions. 69% of our parent survey respondents told us that their child has an attendance that would be classed as persistent absence, as it stands at 90% or less. 7% of parents reported that their children only attend their setting for the equivalent of one day a week, and at its very worst, 3% told us that their child simply cannot or does not attend at all.

The clear consequences of dealing with financial hardship while trying to maintain an education could not be clearer in these attendance figures. For parents, the impossible strain of paying for the uniforms, transport, trips, and most of all, learning resources, creates chasms which are filled by poor wellbeing, bullying, low self-confidence and hopelessness for their children. These factors hold them back from attending and thriving in their education settings, which simply perpetuates the cycle.



School Holidays

While many of our questions have focused on attendance, education settings and learning experiences, we also have an interest in understanding the opposite situation: the gaps that are created during school holidays. Our work at Bettle UK already helps us to see and know the incredibly challenging home lives that our young grantees face. Those enduring particular hardship endure discomfort and poor home conditions. So, while we acknowledge the difficulties that education settings can present, we also know that there is not necessarily a better space for children at home, either. With this in mind, we asked parents to share challenges that the school holidays bring.

Boredom and Hunger

An overwhelming majority of responses alluded to the debilitating boredom and under-stimulation that their children endure. Phrases frequently used by respondents included ‘nightmare’, ‘stressful’, ‘long’, and ‘isolating’. Most of the pressing issues can be attributed almost entirely to a lack of funds for days out, resources and sustenance. Almost every response told us that lack of entertainment was the worst factor, strongly worsened by the lack of structure and routine. This simply leaves children with nothing to do for days or weeks on end.

With the sheer cost of activities outside the home, many parents told us that their children don’t get to do any for the entire duration of the holidays. Those that they do are limited to activities that are local, free and particularly underwhelming for teenagers, such as parks or woods. Many responses indicated that children of all ages were prone to meltdowns, arguments, and fighting with their siblings, due to sheer boredom. These circumstances gave rise to unhealthy behaviours, such as overuse of screens and poor socialisation.



**“He has no friends, he doesn’t go out and stays inside on the computer all day”
(parent)**

“Not being able to afford days out means constant fighting and arguments due to being bored” (parent)

Even more pressingly, many families find the conflict of reduced access to free school meals and the increased cost of feeding their children at home to be a huge challenge; they often attribute this specific increased cost as a reason for not being able to do activities. Many parents told us that food voucher schemes aren’t adequate, and that they experience increased worry and anxiety because at least free school meals would otherwise account for one healthy meal per day. Sadly, for some, there is no way to cover the cost of additional food, so children simply go without enough to eat during holidays. These concerns were mirrored, though in fewer responses, for the increased cost of heating and lighting in the winter holidays.



**“The children eat so much during the school holidays...it’s been a struggle to keep the cupboards full. I’ve had to spend money which I’d like to spend on days out on that extra bit of food for the children”
(parent)**

**“I am always in a panic zone of what will they eat as I just run out of food. My 13-year-old asked me this afternoon for snacks and there were none to give”
(parent)**

Wellbeing and Isolation

The wellbeing of both parents and children is highly impacted by the school holidays. For adults, the significant stress and inability to provide food and entertainment gives rise to feelings of inadequacy and guilt. One told us that the entire time ‘gives me severe anxiety’. For parents of younger children in early years or primary education, there is also the difficult choice to work more hours to afford holiday childcare or accept a reduced income to provide care, both of which create pressures and overwhelm. Respondents also recognise the terrible impacts on their children’s mental health. Many gave examples of their children retreating into themselves, acting out, and displaying symptoms of depression.



“I feel I let my children down by not being able to afford fun days out, I feel a failure sometimes, being a single parent struggling all the time takes a massive toll” (parent)

“The older one tends to stay in her bedroom. I know if it was a day out, she would come but we can’t do this. I heard her say ‘why is it school holidays when we don’t get a holiday like other kids do?’. It is very depressing when you are unable to provide” (parent)

“I hate the school holidays as I feel awful that I can’t afford to do much with them or take them anywhere nice” (parent)

“It is very difficult to keep them engaged and active, which can affect their mental wellbeing...the holidays often feel long and isolating for them” (parent)

Poor wellbeing also manifests itself as loneliness and envy; isolation is rampant. School holidays offer children a time to compare their experiences of poverty against peers going on holiday and enjoying multiple activities. Parents describe the long stretches that their children endure without seeing anyone at all, and the tensions caused when they hear about what their friends have been enjoying. Many spoke about their children’s desperate desire to go abroad like others, and how difficult it is to get younger children to understand just why they don’t get to have the same experiences.



“Every time my son asks why we can’t go anywhere, it breaks my heart because I don’t have the means. We spend all our holidays at home while other children go out and enjoy. My son feels sad sometimes because he sees other children having more” (parent)

“The kids miss out terribly in school holidays...[they] stand out in a negative way next to the average child [which] has huge mental, physical, emotional and financial impacts” (parent)



These feelings were very clear in the young respondents' words too, though we did not ask them directly about the challenges of the school holidays. They largely reflect the feelings and knowledge that their parents and carers shared with us, but their descriptions were tough to read. They frequently use words like 'isolated', 'lonely', 'secluded' and 'left out'. They also gave many examples of situations where they have been invited to activities which are out of reach, and even more sadly, where the invite simply isn't extended at all. School holidays act as a magnifying glass for the wider issues that poverty presents, which feeds back into a negative cycle of how the children are perceived at their education setting.

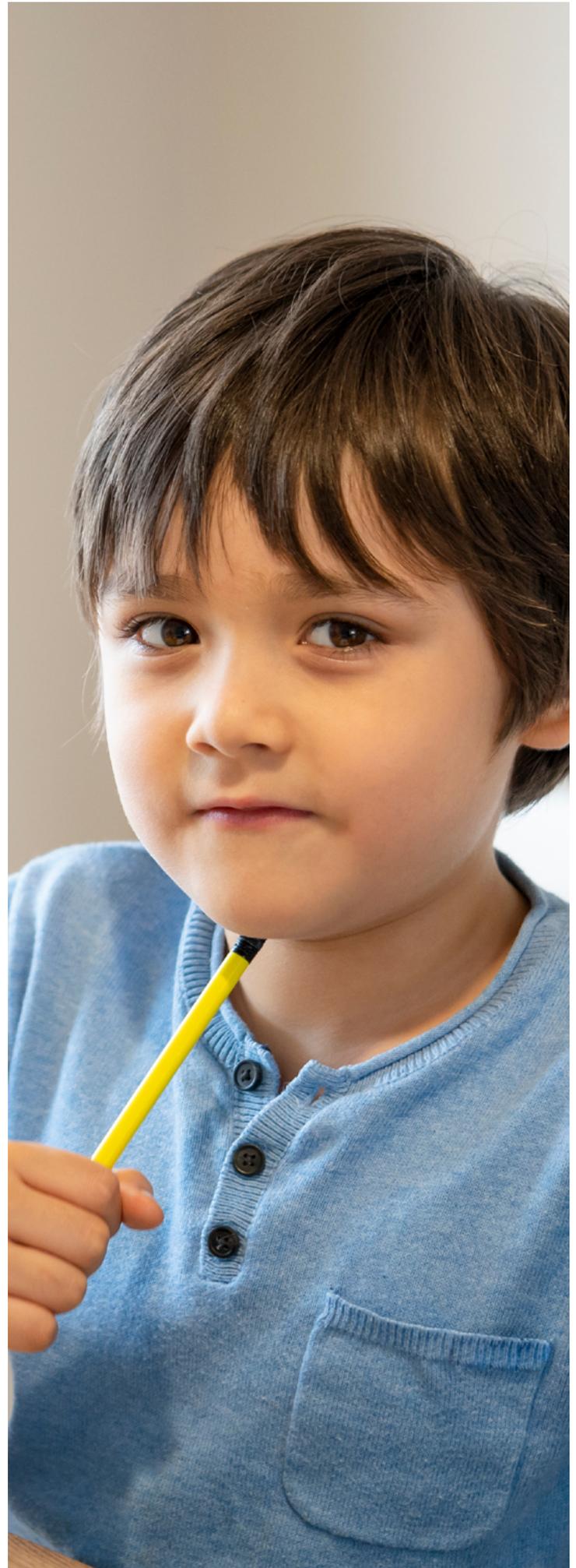


“My friends invite each other to their houses but not me and I can't invite my friends to my house because I don't have one” (CYP)

“You stand out because you don't have the trendiest stuff as others and can't go out and enjoy the extra stuff outside of school. Always being left out because of this” (CYP)

“My peers at college are always talking about how they are going on holidays and I have never been on holiday or get to go somewhere nice” (CYP)

“I feel a bit left out when everyone's going out and able to enjoy weekends and plans days out, I get offered, but I can't go cause I have no money” (CYP)



Transiency

Households living in poverty are vulnerable to high levels of transiency. They are prone to frequent moves, with many respondents telling us that they had been made homeless because they have been unable to afford their rent. For Buttle UK grantees, there is also vulnerability caused by the wider crises families face, particularly those fleeing abuse and living in refuges, both of which have strong relationships with disadvantage and financial hardship. As outlined earlier in this report, some children have experienced such extreme bullying and isolation at their education setting due to factors related to their hardship that a school move has been necessary.

When we asked, **37%** of parents told us that their **children had had to move schools** or education settings because of their circumstances. We asked them to tell us about the challenges this presented. One of the main issues they shared was the difficulties their children had with making and maintaining friendships, and the isolation this causes. They sometimes attributed this to the bullying their children had experienced, but largely due to the uncertainty they had endured, and the ensuing impact on their social skills and confidence. This has an impact on their mental health, and results in low confidence and risk of school refusal. Furthermore, through moving, children and young people lose the support, both formal and informal, that they had in their former school.

In addition to the social aspect, parents told us that their children were now underachieving where they hadn't previously, and that they could not keep up with their learning. This further exacerbates the disadvantages they already face because they cannot afford key learning resources. Once again, the cycle of diminished learning and not fitting in at their educational setting feeds into much wider impacts; respondents described sleeplessness, behavioural problems, fear of rejection, poor mental health, shyness, and low confidence.



“It had a drastic impact on their confidence and sense of belonging. They’re only 5 and 6, the emotions of what’s being missed takes up a significant amount of brain space for a small child and that makes learning harder” (parent)

“Starting over has been difficult academically, it has impacted their learning, and they are not achieving at their expected level” (parent)

“It caused lots of emotional distress, incurred more problems with bullies, loneliness, no attention span, [and] attendance decline” (parent)



“Massive social isolation...taken away from the area and house they were both born in and loved and had to join new schools in new areas with no friends or support network” (parent)

“He’s had to leave behind his friends, I can’t afford for him to travel to see them” (parent)

Some parents shared insights into challenges related to transiency even where their children hadn't actually changed settings. This was in circumstances where they had fought to keep them in their original school place when they had had to move some distance away because of financial difficulty. The biggest challenge appears to be in the cost and inconvenience of travel across increased distance, and the sacrifices that they and their children face to retain a least one facet of stability. One of the hardest aspects that these families face is continuing uncertainty where they are so vulnerable financially.



“When I had to move house we moved further away...I was struggling to get them to school, especially when it would rain as they would be going to school drenched and had to sit in wet clothes all day” (parent)

“It was very disruptive and it may be something we have to do again as I cannot afford the rent in the town I live in...I really don't want to have to move as it's so unsettling” (parent)

“Their education has been impacted. They have been to more than 6 schools, moved several times. Never been in one area for more than 3 years” (parent)

In some instances, moving schools starts a serious chain of events for vulnerable children. For several, we heard that they had been completely out of school for months or even years at a time. Others had moved repeatedly, cycling through new schools each time. One parent described her child's worsening mental health because of this continual change and instability, resulting in a hospitalisation for mental health issues. Another spoke about her child's low self-esteem and subsequent attempted overdose. While these are the most serious consequences of transiency, they are the real lived experiences of children in poverty attempting to access their right to an education.

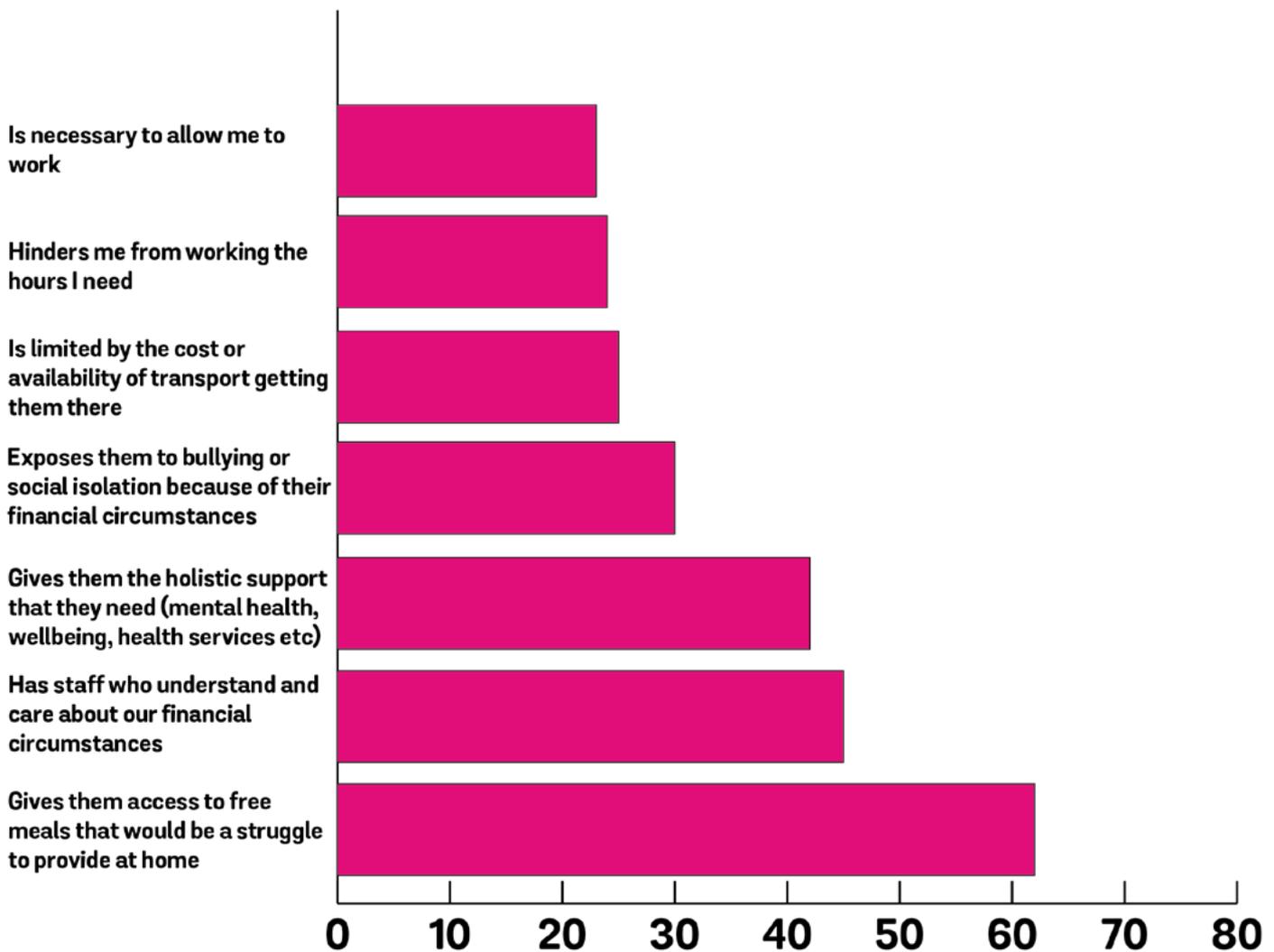


THE ROLE OF EDUCATION SETTINGS

Focus on Settings

Much of the learning uncovered in this report has been taken from the wide range of experiences that families have shared with us. However, we recognise the significant role that individual education settings have in how these disadvantages and challenges play out for families. We also understand the varying motivations around attendance in general for some parents and carers more than others, where they may be reliant on it themselves to facilitate their own needs and priorities. With this in mind, we posed a series of statements to parents, asking them to tell us whether it was true. The proportions are reported in the chart below.

My child's education setting...



The most popular statement surrounded the role that education settings have in providing critical free meals. We know already that lack of food is contributing to poor outcomes, both in terms of capacity to concentrate and in hunger during school holidays. Therefore, it is positive seeing that 62% of respondents felt that their child's setting is filling that gap through provision of free meals. However, this suggests that 38% of families are not receiving free meals for their children at school. As children in low-income households are entitled to free school meals, this may be explained by the income threshold being too low – something that will be addressed by the planned change to extend free school meals to all households entitled to Universal Credit from school year 2026-27. Responses from parents also

suggest there may be barriers to the take-up of free school meals due to operational, rather than eligibility reasons.



“Even though my daughter is entitled to free school meals, the schools are not issuing them to her and another daughter is not in school and gets zero help” (parent)

“There is an outstanding balance of £53 on the school account and I’m now being threatened with court to retrieve this. This balance was incurred before I was eligible for free school meals” (parent)

It is hard to see positivity in the next two most popular statements; fewer than half of respondents felt that their child’s setting has staff who understand the financial challenges they face (45%) or provides the full holistic support they need (only 42%). It is hard to unpick exactly why some settings succeed where others do not, but there were no noticeable patterns by key stage or setting. It appears to come down to the individual skill and experience of the school, college, or university setting itself in how they support and address disadvantage for their vulnerable pupils. Some parents were emphatic in their praise for their children’s setting, telling us that they and their children felt safe and supported because of their empathy. Others felt that they lacked sympathy or care, pushing instead for higher attendance and increasing attainment above their child’s wellbeing.



“Our temporary accommodation is in a relatively affluent area and hence the school has limited understanding of issues affecting my 13 year old, like not having his own bedroom or any living space/table to complete his work” (parent)

It is concerning that a quarter of parents felt that their children’s attendance was being hindered by travel difficulties. They attribute this not only to the high costs of public transport, but also the inaccessibility of some settings in conjunction with a lack of personal transport to support their children in getting there. We heard before that some family’s transient living circumstances and lack of choice in housing leaves them further from settings than preferable.



“She is late for school daily. Her school have mostly been supportive but I’ve recently felt under more pressure from the school to attend meetings about her punctuality even though I have communicated with them about the current challenge” (parent)

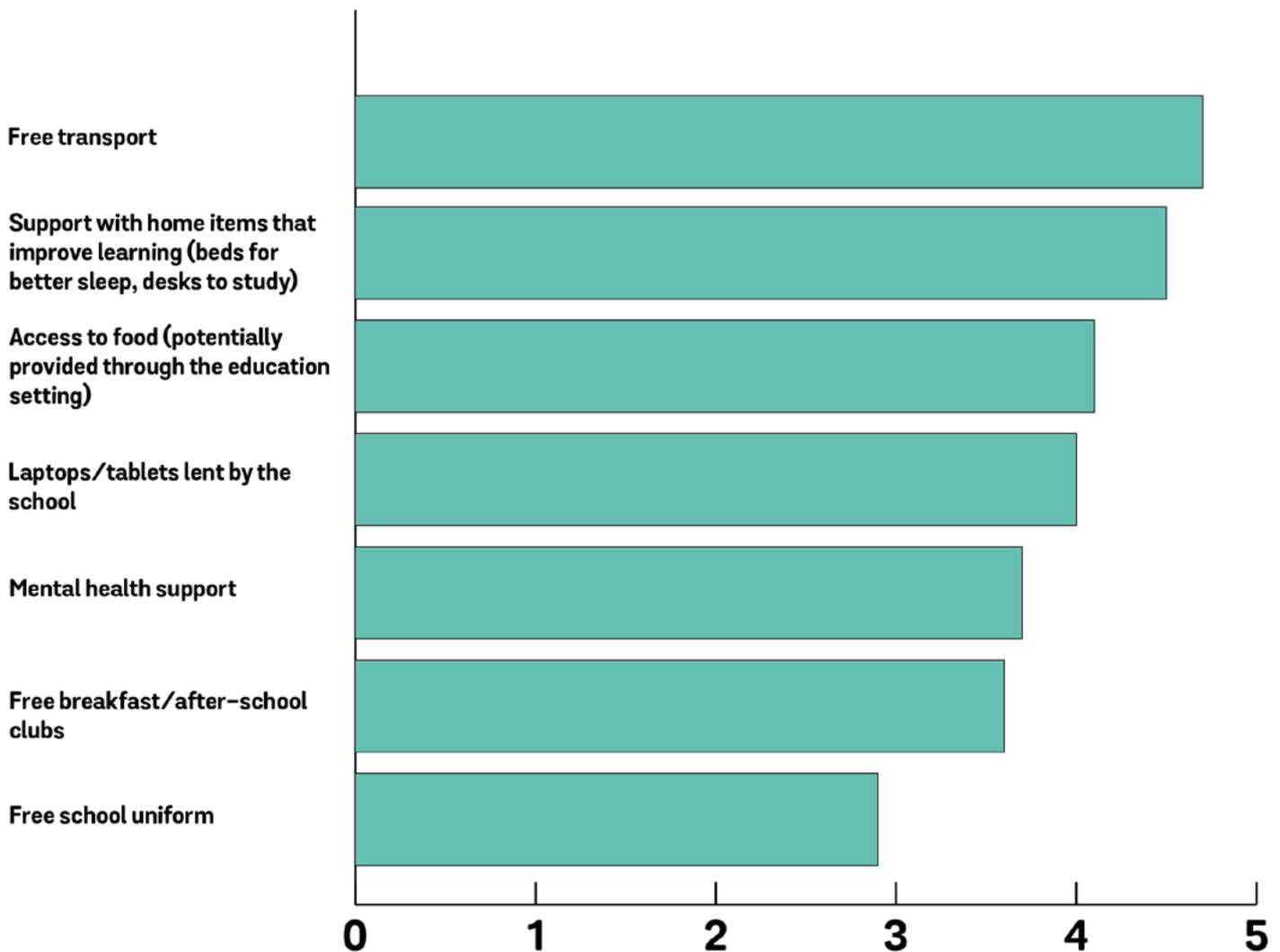
“It would be very helpful if transport was free as it costs nearly £10 a day for bus from and to his school” (parent)

Finally, we saw almost equal proportions of parents describing how helping their children to attend their setting both hinders them from working or is a necessity to help them do so. Parents with children in early years and primary education settings were slightly more likely to report that their attendance hindered their working, which they largely attribute to limited school hours and high care needs. Most parents who told us that their child’s attendance was a necessity explained that they otherwise would not be able to earn, if they were balancing childcare during the day.

Interventions

Key interventions, provided through education settings and wider government schemes, have a role to play in reducing or eliminating the myriad challenges that financial hardship raises. From our predictions of the issues that we knew families face through our grant-making at Buttle UK, as well as knowledge of the systemic issues described in previous research we have undertaken, we asked families to rank seven key interventions that could allow better or easier education uptake.

Intervention Ranking



The intervention with the highest average ranking was free school uniform, with 31% of parents ranking it first and 66% ranking it in their top three. This is not surprising, given the extensive annual financial strain it causes for parents and the misery and humiliation that it brings to children and young people going without. While some respondents alluded to a uniform bank at their child's setting, it is a matter of continual challenge to most others. It is clear that parents feel the duplicity in the fact that schools can readily set uniform policies without being required by law to provide these free of charge for those in need, and then punish or exclude children for failing to fulfil these standards.



“[I need] school uniform vouchers for each term. The expenses are high and some of us find it very difficult to pay for each season as new uniforms are needed as the children grow and believe it or not, they always come home in ripped clothes and shoes” (parent)

“The school tell me every week my children are in some of the wrong uniform and I have told them that they have outgrown their old ones and I can’t afford new ones right now” (parent)

“I’m the one that gets questioned why my kids may not have the correct uniform and on their school reports has been marked as red or amber, I try not to let the thought of poverty affect their aspirations because they are still young” (parent)



“The cost of after school clubs makes it difficult for any parent to work, which end before my shift is over...[I wish the] money to pay for childcare could be spent on the children and their wellbeing but if I don’t work then I can’t afford basics so I am in a lose-lose situation” (parent)

“Clubs are expensive, therefore I am limited to working around the school hours...this seriously affects my income, I have to work as much as possible to provide for my son. The school don’t care about this” (parent)

“Nursery and reception ages are hard due to expensive fees, with lack of morning and after school clubs, half term and summer holiday clubs. The government has put stress on parents to find employment around these hours, yet unable to facilitate the parent’s needs” (parent)

More surprising was the high ranking of free after-school and breakfast clubs, given that they did not flag in other data analysed in this report. These were described as being a huge support for working parents, which in turn raises their capacity to earn. Some felt that the school or government needed to do better to recognise their need and the role that it could play if it could be more supportive of working parents. Before- and after-school clubs also provide some opportunities for socialisation and fun, which parents recognise their children as otherwise missing out on.

It is hoped that the Government’s free breakfast club programme, which began to be rolled out in April 2025, should begin to address some of the need that these respondents raised.

Mental health support was ranked first by 16% of parents, with 44% of parents ranking it in their top three. It also had the third highest average ranking. It is very easy to see the serious necessity of these services for children living in financial hardship, given the awful circumstances that have been explored across this report. There is a challenge in the acknowledgement that mental health support is sometimes necessary because of what children suffer in their education settings, while also having a role to play in helping them get back into the same settings.



“I feel as though sometimes the staff are too quick to put the kids into isolation or detention...how does that help with mental health sitting in a room on your own” (parent)

“It would be nicer if schools had a designated mental health worker, to check in on vulnerable children and make sure they have someone reliable, trustworthy and consistent to help with worries” (parent)

“I feel poverty prevents her from accessing the proper therapy she needs to be able to access services that could help her being isolated and help her lead a healthy normal life as well as access a real education” (parent)

It might seem surprising to see free transport and items for the home environment with such low rankings, given the extensive complaints that have been levelled against these challenges across these findings. However, with any sort of ranking system, we know that it is about prioritisation. We therefore understand that it is not that many families think these interventions are unimportant, but simply that other needs have to be prioritised first. This is clear in the written responses that accompanied the question.



Children and Young People's Wishes

We knew how important it was to capture young people's direct experiences of their education settings. With this in mind, we asked them to tell us what they wished that their school, college or university knew about living in financial hardship and the challenges they face. We also asked them to tell us what they wished their peers knew about poverty, thinking about how this might support their education.

One of the strongest themes across their answers was the significant frustrations that young people experience when they get in trouble or difficulty at their setting due to their hardship. They allude to being misunderstood or misrepresented by their financial circumstances, which mask their efforts and commitment to their education. This was especially apparent for factors such as attendance, homework, and uniform. They wanted teachers and educators to know and understand the issues, to better support their specific challenges and provide more holistic care.



“I wish my attendance would be looked at as not a reflection of me and a sign of me having little dedication to my studies. But taking into account based on the hardship I face” (CYP)

“I wish my teachers would understand I can't always do work on a laptop and that I have to go out to find internet like a library but I get tired after school and just hungry and want to sleep” (CYP)

“It's not always your fault if you've got issues with transportation or uniform isn't correct. Sometimes learning equipment takes longer to get and we shouldn't be blamed for it” (CYP)

A powerful notion was shared by several respondents, namely around the role that their education settings could play in levelling the playing field. They described key items that their settings would ideally pay for or provide, highlighting the disparities in access that do not feel fair. They showed incredible insight in emphasising the importance of equality for all through this specific provision. It is clear that to young people, equal opportunities are something they wish to protect and champion for themselves and for others.



“I think there needs to be more equality in school/college, and that poor kids don't have to feel embarrassed when they can't go on trips or have a laptop” (CYP)

“I wish the schools would make everyone wear the same thing so no one gets left out and I wish they would not charge so much for school trips abroad coz I can't go on them” (CYP)

“I would wish that they would make trips affordable to everyone so that we can all be equal” (CYP)

“I hope that in our lives there is no difference between rich and poor. We are all one, building a bright future in the general community” (CYP)

When it came to sharing what they wished their peers knew about financial hardship, many of the responses were heartbreaking. They reflect the sadness, insecurities, and anxieties that young learners face, and their wish that there was better understanding to stop them from being singled out or bullied for their circumstances. Several said that they wished that peers would not be so mean. They asked for acceptance above all else, wishing their peers would be ‘understanding’, ‘caring’, and

‘supportive’, or offer ‘respect’, ‘less judgment’ and ‘empathy’.

We end this report with four powerful quotes from some of the incredibly articulate young individuals who responded to our survey. These responses alone aptly illuminate the context of this entire report, and what we can all learn from the findings presented here.



“That each person’s financial hardship is all different and they are no more less of a human so why treat them differently” (CYP)

“That I have to earn it! That we aren’t at an equal footing as they want to believe, it’s so discrediting of my struggle when they say, “well we all made it here now”” (CYP)

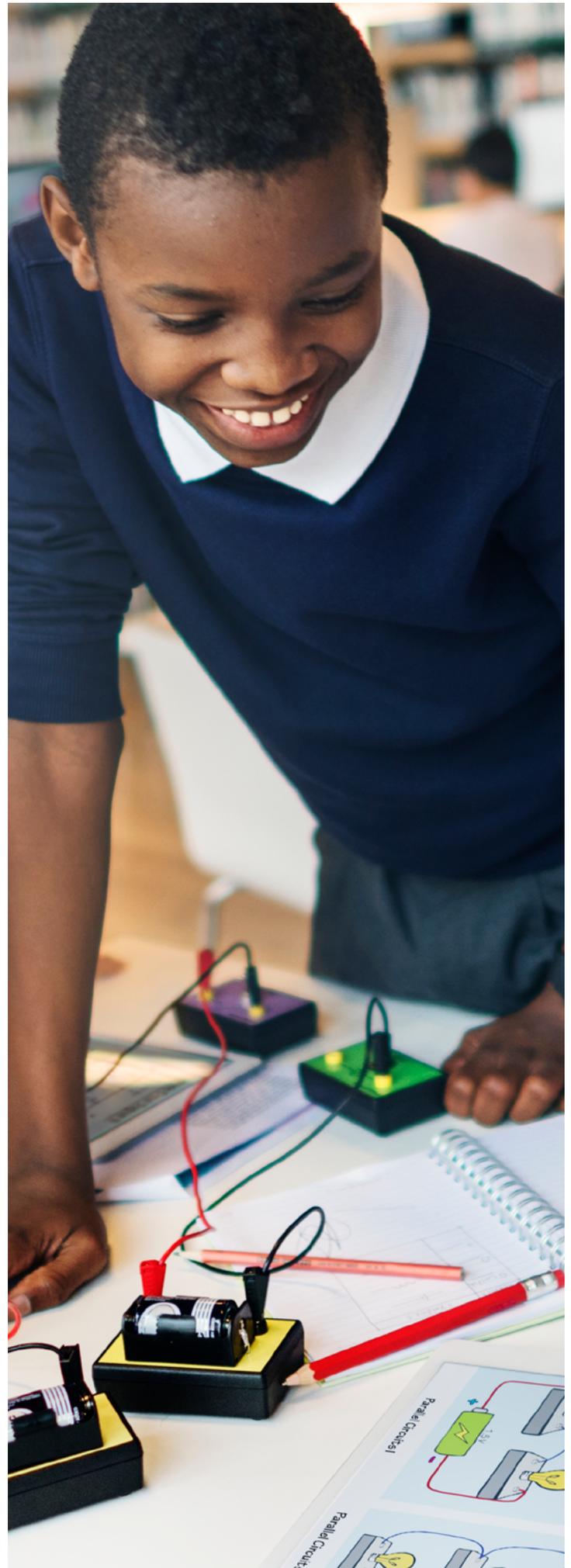
“I wish people understood that living in financial hardships is not just about not having money but about dealing with constant stress and pressure while still trying to keep up with everyone else. It affects my confidence when I can’t afford new clothes or when I have to use a torn bag because I have no choice. I wish they knew that it’s not easy to balance studies while worrying about money and that sometimes I can’t join in on social activities simply because I can’t afford it, not because I don’t want to. More understanding and less judgment would make a big difference” (CYP)

“I wish people at my school understood that living in financial hardship isn’t just about not having money—it’s about constantly having to make difficult choices. I wish others knew that students in this situation are not lazy or less capable—we’re just carrying extra burdens” (CYP)

Summary of Findings

The findings are clear: children and young people are being marginalised and excluded from their right to access learning opportunities commensurate with their peers. There are multiple intertwined factors. It can be hard to see where one problem starts and another ends, because the issues are complex and intersectional. Over 1,000 respondents taught us that:

- Children and young people do not have the critical items they need to access their education, either to support their learning at home or to support their attendance at school and beyond. They do not get to take part in extra-curricular activities and experiences that would support their wider development. This leaves them lagging behind their peers.
- Children and young people suffer huge impacts on their social, mental, and emotional wellbeing because of their financial hardship. This both causes, and is caused by, barriers to their education. These barriers are not always resource-focused; they encompass marginalisation, stigma, bullying, isolation, and mental health issues. These factors cause children to fall further behind with their education every day and negatively shapes their self-perception.
- Families living with financial hardship are susceptible to specific vulnerabilities which further widen the education gap. This includes high levels of absenteeism, increased likelihood of moving schools, and importantly, unmet physiological need. Hunger and tiredness are holding back vulnerable children's education, all for the want of food and rest. These needs, and specific items that are required for learning, are particularly out of reach for larger families with three or more children.
- There is mixed feedback on the role of schools, colleges, and universities in the education crisis described throughout this report. This indicates that there is not a consistent approach to intervention or support, both from within education settings and from government services designed to support families living in financial hardship.



CONCLUSIONS

This project challenged us to use our platform to give voice and power to marginalised families, and vulnerable children and young people, on issues that they live with every single day. We are very proud to have undertaken this first deeper dive into the theme of education, uncovering the multiple gaps, barriers, and challenges that it presents to so many families living in poverty.

The findings make for tough reading. It is challenging to read authentic and direct accounts of severe bullying, fear, anxiety, and marginalisation, especially knowing that this is the lived experience of childhoods in poverty; these are children and young people just trying to access their education to give themselves the better future they deserve. It is hard to bear witness to the gaps and chasms that children and young people are falling into, through no fault of their own, by a system that is not yet set up to give them the full support they need to thrive. If they had this support, they would not be facing an even bleaker outlook because of the barriers that are holding them back today.

However, we also see room for change, including for wider systemic changes that could really make a difference.

It is clear from our findings that some families quite simply do not have sufficient income to enable their children to fully participate in and benefit from their education. The scale of the problems shared in this report highlight a fundamental crisis; a social security system that is failing to provide the very basics needed for children and young people to fully engage in education. Recent and forthcoming changes made by the Government - including the extension of free school meals to children of all households on Universal Credit, free breakfast clubs in every primary school in England and a limit on the number of branded school uniform items that schools can require - will help, but they do not go far enough. As the most pressing priority, we urge the Government to:

- Lift the two-child limit and benefit cap. Scrapping the two-child limit would mean an additional £3,000 per child³, per year (beyond the first two children) for families with three or more

children, and make a huge difference to supporting children's engagement in education.

We acknowledge that schools need additional resource to provide the mental health and wellbeing support that children and young people in poverty need. As such we support the Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition's call for the Government to commit to:

- The 100% rollout of Mental Health Support Teams by the end of this Parliament, to deliver on its commitment to provide a specialist mental health professional in every school.
- A fully resourced, national implementation programme to support every school, college, and university to adopt a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing.

This report also highlights the role that schools, colleges and universities can play in supporting children and young people in poverty. We therefore make the following recommendations for education settings:

- More training for education providers, on the experience, prevalence, challenges and impact of financial hardship for children and young people.
- Review policies such as uniform, attendance and homework policies, that serve to punish children and young people in financial hardship for factors outside of their control.
- Awareness raising for all students about the experiences and impact of financial hardship, to address stigma and bias.
- Provision or loan of laptops or tablets for children in low-income households.

As for what this means for Buttle UK, we have learnt much about the items and activities that families, young people, and children both lack and desire, and the impacts of these, which will be incorporated into our grant-making and internal discussions about how our grants can keep supporting engagement in education in particular.

We have also gained insight into the power of research, and how we can continue to expand on this element of our work to contribute to the wider narratives playing out about childhoods lived in poverty and hardship.

We could not have got anywhere without the incredibly powerful and thoughtful insights shared by parents, carers, and all the 11-19-year-olds who took part in this research. We wish to express our deep appreciation to them.



¹At Buttle UK, we give grants specifically to independent young people who are estranged from their families, typically without dependents of their own. Their age puts them in the bracket of children and young people, but their circumstances make them the head of their own household.

² [Education Statistics Services | GOV.UK](#) (please note – all data drawn down in early July 2025)

³ End Child Poverty www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/two_child_limit/



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