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## Quarter of a million children enter secondary school without basic maths and English

**Government set to fail target of 90% of pupils in England reaching set standard at age 11, research finds**

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**Michael Savage** *Policy Editor*

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Rishi Sunak has been warned that a target to boost the number of children entering secondary school with the expected standards of reading, writing and maths is “a far cry from reality”, amid new evidence that 275,000 pupils a year are leaving primary education without the right level of skills.

Ministers have set a target of ensuring 90% of children achieve the national curriculum standard in reading, writing and maths at the end of primary education by 2030. However, after several years of slow progress, attainment has slipped back to levels only slightly above those of 2015-16.

The slump means that in 2022, 41% of year 6 pupils in England left primary school without meeting the expected standards in literacy and maths - 275,000 11-year-

olds, according to researchers at the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) thinktank. That is 50,000 more than in 2019.

It comes amid concerns that the impact of the pandemic, and long periods of lost learning, is being felt in classrooms, particularly among children from poorer households. The report states that the [attainment gap in education](#) - that between the poorest and most advantaged - is at its widest level for a decade.

Similar [recent research](#) by the speech and communication charity I CAN found that skills in speaking had also fallen, with 1.5 million children across the UK estimated by teachers to be suffering from underdeveloped speech and language skills following the pandemic.

Inside the classroom, concerns are being expressed by teachers about their chances of reversing the slide, given their current working conditions and resources. Only two-fifths of primary teachers believe their pupils will hit expected standards in foundation subjects, according to a poll of teachers by the Teacher Tapp app, commissioned by the CSJ.

Just 32% of teachers working in schools in the areas of highest deprivation were confident that most of their pupils would meet targets in numeracy and literacy skills this academic year, compared with 51% in more affluent places.

“The progress made in improving overall attainment has been largely reversed,” the report states. “School shutdowns had an immediate and detrimental impact on primary educational outcomes. In the first full year after school shutdowns, 41% of all year 6 pupils left school without reaching expected standards.”

The CSJ, which was co-founded by former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith, states that “radical plans” are needed to reverse the slide. It calls on ministers to turn to parents in an attempt to boost performance in basic subjects. However, others have pointed to the refusal by the Treasury in the summer of 2020, then led by Sunak, to sanction the full programme of post-pandemic catch-up funding that was called for in a government-backed review. A £15bn plan for recovery [was rejected](#).

“The idea that 90% of children will achieve expected standards in reading, writing and maths by 2030 is a far cry from reality,” said Alice Wilcock, the CSJ report’s author. “Teachers told us they are worried that most of their children won’t meet these standards this year. We need a bold plan for education reform if the government wants to improve educational standards for all children.”

Lee Elliot Major, professor of social mobility at the University of Exeter, said the failure to equip all students with basic foundational skills was “the biggest scandal

of our educational system”. He called for a scheme urging greater parental participation in encouraging basic reading and maths skills.

“New thinking is required,” he said. “There are many other sensible proposals in this report, including those aiming to attract and develop teachers. But for me, a national parental participation strategy would be a potential gamechanger.

“The government can publish all the ambitious targets for maths and English it likes. But failing to embrace this core education truth will mean they turn into unfulfilled dreams - condemning hundreds of thousands of pupils to leave school lacking the foundational skills needed to get on in life.

“It’s time for us to take a bold step and embrace the power of parent participation in education.”

A Department for Education spokesperson said: “The pandemic had a huge impact on pupils’ learning. Our education recovery programme, backed by £5bn, has delivered nearly three million tutoring courses. We are investing more than ever before in our schools, including in literacy and numeracy programmes -helping us meet our ambition for 90% of children leaving primary school to reach the expected standard in reading, writing and maths by 2030.”

● This article was amended on 16 February 2023 to clarify the I CAN report’s finding of 1.5m children with underdeveloped speech and language skills is based on teachers’ estimates.

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