



## Pupil Premium Primer



# Community engagement and the two-in-one school

Preparing a long-term pupil premium strategy

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## Schools that serve affluent and disadvantaged communities

Our research identified a number of secondary schools that are—according to many measures—highly performing, and yet have persistently had attainment gaps that were significantly larger than the national average. These schools have a strongly academic ethos, flourishing sixth forms, and their students are achieving highly in examinations. They are all oversubscribed, have good reputations in their local communities, and have received favourable Ofsted reports for many years. Because of their strengths, they rose early to the challenge of reducing inequalities in academic performance presented by the introduction of the pupil premium in 2011. Yet the progress gap has remained or even widened: comparing students with similar starting points in Year 7, pupil premium students are achieving lower academic qualifications than their peers.

These schools have a high proportion of students from the most affluent areas in the wider region. However, they also serve a significant proportion of families from the most deprived areas of the local neighbourhood. Staff described their concerns that students from these communities didn't always feel that they belonged:

“I think a lot of it is that identity and status is a barrier to learning. And so it's creating the vocabulary and the discussion about, 'Well, where do I as a young man - pupil premium, working class family – where do I fit into this knowledge-based economy?'”

In some cases, there were stark differences between the communities served by the school: students arrived in different buses to different playgrounds, lived in different directions from the school, or came from different ethnic backgrounds. As one school leader commented, it was in fact as if their school were “two schools in one”.

## An especially acute challenge for two-in-one schools

In many of these schools, students who qualify for pupil premium, as well as those who do not, achieve better academic results than their peers nationally. But because measures of academic progress and attainment are closely associated with socio-economic status, schools with students from families which are extremely wealthy or very poor are more likely to have large attainment gaps.

This puts strain on senior leaders responsible for pupil premium funding. They were more likely to report feeling under pressure to reduce the attainment gap and demonstrate their work to Ofsted, and they were less clear about how to have a positive impact. They were also more likely to feel different and unusual compared to other schools in the local area: it was not obvious to them that strategies that were effective in nearby schools would work in their context.

## A different approach to the pupil premium

Two-in-one schools are more likely than other schools to have a strong focus on cultural capital, adapting curriculums, extra-curricular activities, and engaging with local communities. It is possible that the resulting whole-school strategies, although primarily implemented to improve the academic performance of students from lower-income families, benefit their peers from higher-income families at least as much and probably more. As a result, positive initiatives do not always lead to improvements in the headline progress data published by the Department for Education and school leaders can feel like they are in a no-win situation.

To illustrate how these challenges have been overcome, here we offer an account of a school that proudly serves diverse communities. Cotham School is successfully reaching out to local communities to improve the support students receive throughout their school careers.



# Engaging communities at Cotham School



## Ethos and Context

“Governors and school leaders have a strong commitment to serving the needs of their diverse community.” (Ofsted, 2018)

“I like working here, it’s a diverse school.” (Middle leader, 2019)

Cotham School in Bristol thrives on diversity and is proud to serve a wide range of different communities. The school has a very large and growing student population, drawn from a wide catchment area over most of Bristol. It has a large sixth form, which operates from a separate but adjacent site, and operates in collaboration with a neighbouring school.

The school buildings are situated within walking distance of the city centre, the city’s university, and the city’s main hospital and Cotham serves many families who are employed in the retail, health and higher education sectors. The largest ethnic group served by the school is the Somali



community. Bristol has a long history of migration from Somalia and Somaliland, which has created a strong and vibrant community. Somaliland was colonised by the British in the 19th century and the first Somali settlers came to the port as seamen in the British Merchant Navy. Increasing numbers of Somalis sought refuge in Bristol in the 1980s and 1990s, fleeing unrest and war. The city continues to welcome Somalian immigrants and several Somali community organisations operate in the city, providing educational as well as other services to Somali and non-Somali families in Bristol. The school today serves many students of Somali heritage who were born in Bristol, as well as first-generation immigrants.

Cotham’s good reputation in the local community is partly the result of a long and rich history which can be traced back to its foundation as a charitable school in 1812. During the Victorian era, it provided vocational training to prepare boys for trade work and mining, which continued when it moved to its current premises and adopted its current name in the 1920s. Two Nobel Prize winning physicists attended the school: Paul Dirac in the 1910s, and Peter Higgs in the 1940s. In the second half of the twentieth century, Cotham operated as a grammar school, first for boys, and then as a mixed-sex school. It became a comprehensive school in 2001 and an academy in 2011.





## Engaging with local communities

Cotham School employs a community worker to ensure that there is meaningful two-way communication between the school and Somali parents and carers. It is more difficult for parents and carers without experience of the English education system themselves to support their children, for example, when guiding homework, choosing their GCSE subjects or applying to university. Some families at the school also face a language barrier in engaging with standard school communications such as parent evenings and school reports. The purpose of the community worker is to open up a new channel for parents and carers to connect with the school, as he himself outlined:

**“In education, there is a gap in between what parents know and what schools are doing, especially secondary schools. All parents want to support their children. No parents wouldn’t want to do it if they know how to do it, or what to do.”**

The community worker took up this role in September 2018, working three days per week. One of his main responsibilities is to facilitate termly meetings between Somali parents and carers and the head of year. This is done in addition to the usual parent evenings and is targeted solely at Somali families. To best suit their needs, the meetings take place in the morning during school. They are designed to be two-way interactions. On the one hand, the

school provides information to parents and carers about the English education system and how they can support their child academically. Year groups are addressed separately, so that relevant aspects of the school system can be addressed for each year group, such as choosing options or revising for GCSE examinations. The school also uses the meetings to listen and respond to parents’ and carers’ concerns. The community worker has many further responsibilities in the school, including mentoring individual students from the Somali community, but it is the termly meetings that have had the most initial impact on relationships with local communities.

## Impact

Feedback from parents and carers has shown that they appreciate having better access to the school and that their understanding of the education system has improved. The school has recorded high levels of attendance at the termly meetings, as well as at other school events, and improved effectiveness of follow-on communications. This has resulted in the community being in much closer contact with the school via the community worker, who has become for some families the first port of call in school, ahead of school reception. Thus, the meetings have improved relationships between the school and students’ families. This is perhaps best evidenced by students themselves, who value their relationship with the community worker and described him as “supportive” and “a good thing at the school”.



## Key messages

It is vital for outreach workers to have a deep understanding of the culture and language of their communities.

Schools are often unaware of many of the barriers that families encounter as they attempt to navigate the English education system.

Some barriers are relatively simple to address, such as explaining school jargon, guiding parents around the virtual learning environment, changing meeting times, translating emails, and using text messaging.

When considering school communications, it is important to focus not only on delivering information to families, but also on finding out exactly what information they need.



This research was conducted by the Education Observatory and funded by the Social Mobility Commission as part of the Against the Odds study. View the full Pupil Premium Primer at

[www.educationobservatory.co.uk/pupilpremiumprimer](http://www.educationobservatory.co.uk/pupilpremiumprimer)