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Historic funding gap persists

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More is spent on secondary pupils, with some primaries receiving as much as third less per head

Money spent on primary pupils in several authorities across England was up to a third less than the amount spent on their secondary counterparts last year.

In 15 authorities, primary expenditure was less than three-quarters that of secondary spending. The lowest was in Middlesbrough, where the proportion was just 66 per cent, although the council there has spent additional money on primaries in the past two years. The highest level of spending on primary pupils was 94 per cent of secondary expenditure.

A report for the Primary Review, published today, found wide variations between primary and secondary spending across England.

Philip Noden and Anne West, of the London School of Economics, authors of the report, noted that the gap in funding between the sectors was first criticised in 1931 and has been the subject of several inquiries. But they said that as long as politicians try to ensure stable school funding, there is little scope to change this historic imbalance.

"It is not self-evident that there should be such a difference in funding levels - especially because later attainment is highly dependent on earlier attainment," they said. They found the funding gap started to narrow in the 1990s, but since 2002-03 has been widening again.

A higher spend was mostly associated with middle schools and small rural schools. But some London boroughs - which do not have middle schools - were among both the highest and lowest spenders.

Northumberland, which has many small, rural schools and a three-tier school system, has the highest level of spending on primary schools compared to secondaries, at 94 per cent of secondary spending per pupil last year.

Suffolk, Merton, Westminster, the Isle of Wight and Lambeth also have primary expenditure per pupil at 90 per cent of secondary expenditure, official figures show.

But the high percentage is little comfort to Northumberland's primaries, who feel they are losing out in comparison to other areas. "Northumberland is one of the lowest-funded authorities in terms of education in England," said a council spokeswoman. "We believe that we are underfunded, and are in consistent dialogue with the Government about levels of funding."

Chris Davis, of the National Primary Headteachers' Association, said funding should be smoothed out, both between key stages and across the country. "The differential in funding when a Year 6 pupil becomes a Year 7 pupil is indefensible," he said. "We would prefer a funding formula based on year group rather than key stage."

Looking at international comparisons, the researchers found that Iceland, where children are taught in all-through schools, is the only country to spend more on primary than secondary pupils. The UK came 14th out of 29 countries.

THE PRIMARY REVIEW

The Primary Review, directed by Professor Robin Alexander of Cambridge University and supported by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, is an independent inquiry into primary education in England.

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