
SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Moving on from initial GCSE ‘failure’: Post-16 transitions for ‘lower attainers’ and why the English education system must do better

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OVERVIEW

In most years, around two fifths of young people in England miss the benchmark of grade 4 (formerly C) in each of English and maths GCSE. Our quantitative and qualitative research investigated the characteristics of these so-called lower attainers and their post-16 transitions to find out who they are and what happens to them. This is the first study to show the heterogeneity of this large section of the GCSE cohort and the variety of their experiences during the post-16 phase.

We found that:

- Many of these young people have substantial achievements but they often feel like failures. Their post-16 transitions tend to be more complex and difficult than for higher achieving peers, with more time and support needed to help them realise their potential.
- Barriers to progression include: insufficient information and guidance; the fact that entry requirements are often based on English and maths GCSEs (even when it is not clear why specific grades are needed); and the low availability and poor visibility of apprenticeships.
- Significant minorities of ‘lower attainers’ start their post-16 phase at the same or lower levels of learning than they have already achieved. Some spend three years or more in the post-16 phase. Many achieve Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications between ages 16 and 19, but on the whole ‘lower attainers’ remain a long way behind higher GCSE achievers.
- Post-16 structures, course offers and entry requirements vary substantially across the country and even within local authority areas, such that people with similar attainment achieve different things depending on where they live. But local areas have very limited capacity and powers to monitor, coordinate or intervene.

Our findings challenge the assumption that it is purely lack of attainment in English and maths that is holding back ‘lower attainers’, rather than a lack of co-ordinated and accessible opportunities to develop and progress.

English and maths are important, but policy needs to shift away from the excessive focus on maximising attainment in these subjects and towards supporting all young people to reach their potential. We set out proposals for: an integrated three-year Upper Secondary Education and Training Phase; changes to curriculum and accountability measures in Key Stage 4 (KS4) to provide a broader base for post-16 progression; and stronger local coordination mechanisms and funding. All of this needs to be supported by better data and intelligence. The prospects of ‘lower attaining’ young people will not be improved while they remain largely invisible.

LOWER GCSE ATTAINERS: A LARGE BUT OVERLOOKED GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE

In most years, around two fifths of young people in England miss the benchmark of grade 4 (formerly C) in each of English and maths when they take their GCSE examinations around the age of 16 at the end of KS4. They are often referred to as GCSE 'lower attainers'. 'Lower attainers' are always with us in similar numbers because, as academic standards rise, attainment thresholds are periodically raised to distinguish between those who have 'succeeded' and 'failed'. Yet relatively little is known about them and the routes they follow after their GCSEs. This is partly because the focus tends to be on maximising numbers achieving the thresholds, and partly because the datasets are complex and not easily combined. This report aims to fill that knowledge gap.

What happens to these young people after KS4 has, for many years, been a low political priority as policy-makers have focused on expanding access to universities and higher-level technical education and training. Is this about to change? Even before the pandemic, concerns were growing about levelling up opportunities and outcomes, including in education, for 'left behind' people and places, as well as about post-Brexit skills supply. Covid-19 is compounding difficulties for 'lower attaining' young people in finding a labour market foothold as job and apprenticeship opportunities contract. Ensuring successful post-16 transitions for lower as well as higher GCSE attainers will need to become a much higher policy priority.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The report is based on quantitative and qualitative research. The quantitative analysis drew on the National Pupil Database (NPD) and Individualised Learner Record (ILR) for the five cohorts of young people completing GCSEs between 2013 and 2017. We report mainly on the 2015 cohort, whom we could follow into the post-16 phase and through to age 19. Our cross-cohort analysis shows that this cohort was not substantially different from those taking GCSEs in 2016 and 2017.

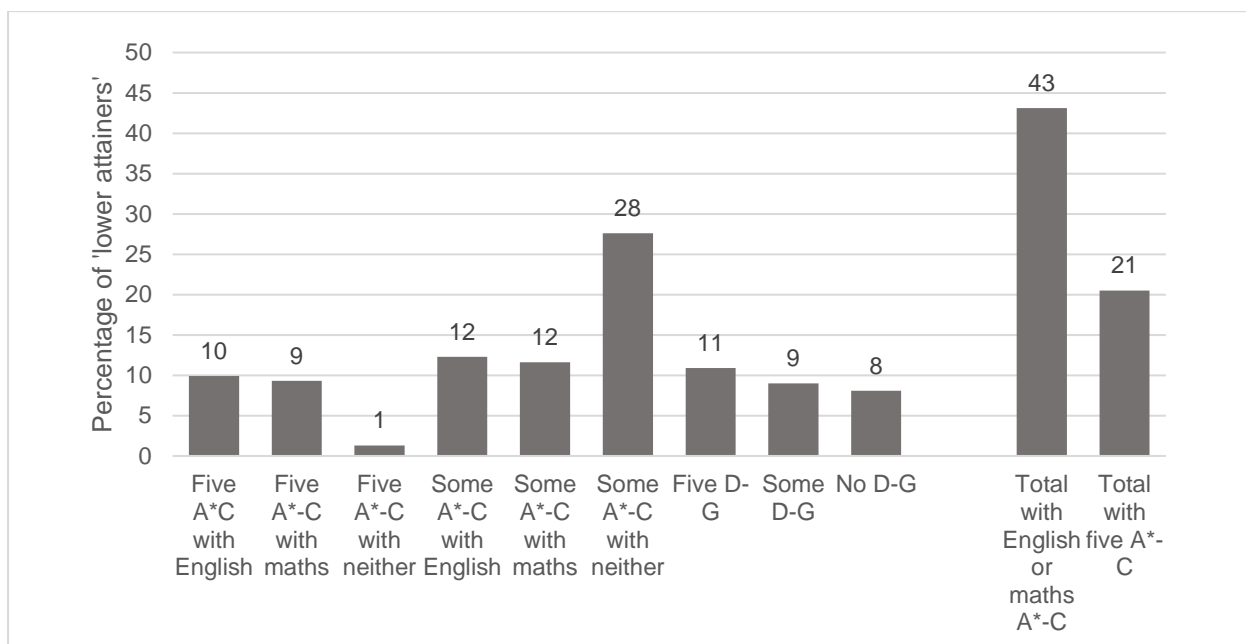
In seven case study localities within Greater Manchester and North of Tyne, we conducted focus groups with 'lower attaining' young people (47 in all). Twelve of these young people were also interviewed. In the same areas, we interviewed and held focus groups with professionals involved in various aspects of post-16 transition and undertook detailed analysis of post-16 opportunities and entry requirements. This detailed mixed-method approach provides a rich picture of the realities of post-16 transition for 'lower attainers' and how it varies from place to place.

KEY FINDINGS

'Lower attainers' are not failures

It is a mistake to think of young people who do not achieve grade 4 or above (formerly A*-C) in English and maths by the end of KS4 as failures – learners who have not achieved 'the basics' or who are leaving school with nothing. Our analysis is the first to demonstrate the heterogeneity of the 'lower attainer' group. In 2015, over two-fifths (43 per cent) of these young people achieved a C or above in either English or maths, and 21 per cent had five A*-C grades or equivalents.

Figure 1: GCSE or equivalent passes among 'lower attainers', 2015 cohort (%)



Source: National Pupil Database. Excludes learners in independent schools.

These young people, with five A*-C and/or with English and maths at grade C or above, typically had an average of eight GCSE passes, only one fewer than the average for non-lower attainers. Even those who gained neither English nor maths at A*-C and had fewer than five higher grade passes tended to have at least five GCSE passes (at any grade). On average, 'lower attainers' were also entered for two vocational qualifications.

However, our qualitative research revealed that 'lower attainers' often feel like failures, partly because the strong emphasis on English and maths throughout their school careers has positioned them as such. They tend to dismiss their other achievements and feel less confident about their futures.

Post-16 decisions for 'lower attainers' are complex and made in a pressurised environment

'Lower attainers' experience more complex and difficult post-16 transitions than their higher achieving peers who move relatively smoothly to A Levels, Level 3 vocational courses and, in some cases, to apprenticeships. For 'lower attainers', critical decisions about careers and vocational courses have to be made at age 15/16 (Year 11) in the context of a 'pressure cooker' year when schools' main focus is on GCSE examinations and achievement in maths and English particularly. In contrast, young people who progress from GCSEs straight to A Levels can delay these critical decisions until the age of 18 and often take a 'gap year' before entering higher education.

Whereas more than half of non-lower attainers go to school sixth forms, fewer than a fifth of 'lower attainers' do so. This means that they are much more likely to move institution. Finding a new post-16 provider is not as straightforward as progressing to a school's sixth form. It takes time and considerable effort involving teachers, family members, local authority and provider personnel.

Our qualitative research revealed that the decision-making period in Year 11 is very challenging for young people with 'lower attainment'. They face an array of post-16 options, from different providers and in different subjects and occupational areas, and with different entry requirements. Many options are blocked by the requirement to have English and maths GCSE at grade 4 or above, even

when it is unclear why having English and maths at this level is strictly necessary given the nature of the course or apprenticeship. Not all 'lower attainers' have the maturity, confidence or information to navigate and evaluate the options available to them. They often feel overlooked or underserved in getting access to careers information, advice, guidance and support. Some find it hard to motivate themselves to make a decision after receiving their GCSE results. Some change courses (and/or institutions) during the autumn term after the GCSE results are announced, while some fall out of the system altogether. 'Lower attainers' are much more at risk of not being in employment, education or training (NEET) after GCSEs or having an 'unknown' destination – 7.1 per cent versus 0.8 per cent of non-lower attainers.

These findings disrupt the notion that, armed with the right information, all young people can make a straightforward transition from Year 11 into post-16 pathways that place them on the next rung of an academic or vocational ladder.

Apprenticeship options for 'lower attainers' remain very limited

Apprenticeship is not the accessible pathway for 'lower attainers' that many would assume it to be. Apprenticeship is only a slightly more common destination for 'lower attainers' (5 per cent) than non-lower attainers (3 per cent). Vacancies for 16-18 year-olds as a whole remain scarce, are often poorly advertised and hard to find. This means apprenticeships often do not form part of 'lower attaining' young people's aspirations and planning for their post-16 options. Young people are very aware of the difficulties in accessing apprenticeships without personal contacts with employers through family or friends. Around 30 per cent of Level 2 and 54 per cent of Level 3 apprenticeship vacancies reviewed for our study also specified a minimum of grade C/4 English and maths as the main entry requirement making them inaccessible to any 'lower attainer'. For this reason, some 'lower attainers' start on a lower-level college course before starting an apprenticeship, although achievement of the course aims may not be required for entry to an apprenticeship.

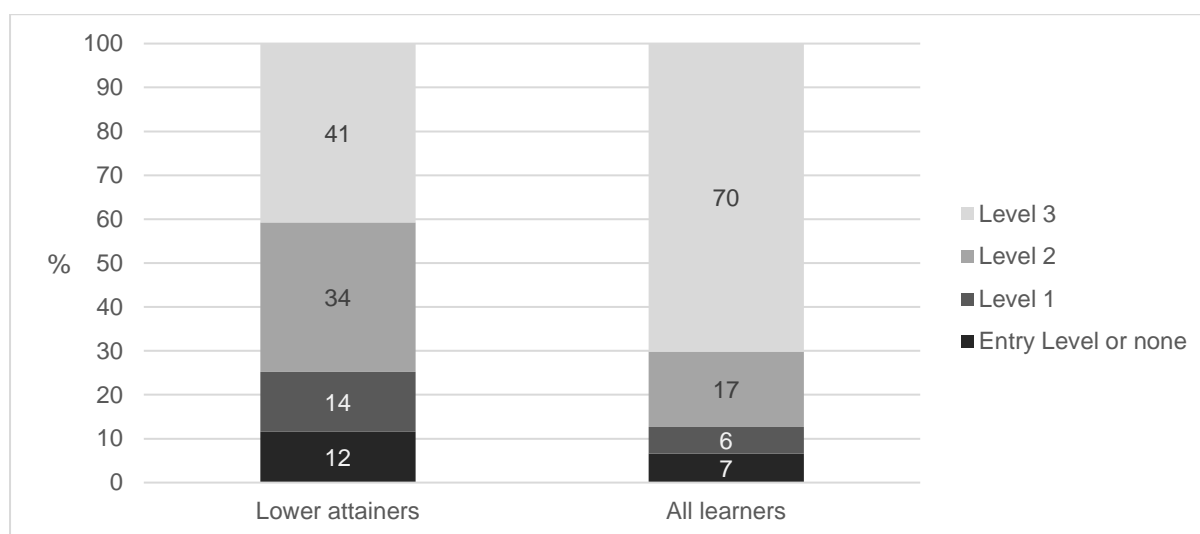
'Lower attainers' can make a lot of progress post-16, but there are significant proportions who do not

Many 'lower attainers' continue to achieve in their post-16 phase. In the 2015 GCSE cohort, 71 per cent achieved a Level 2 qualification or higher during the two years after KS4 (i.e. by age 18) and 34 per cent achieved a Level 3 qualification (or higher). By 19, these figures rose further to 75 per cent and 41 per cent. An important point, not widely understood or acknowledged, is that some 'lower attainers' spend three years or more in the post-16 phase.

However, even by age 19, 'lower attainers' are still a long way behind higher GCSE attainers. For the 2015 GCSE cohort, around 12 per cent had not achieved a Level 1 qualification in the post-16 phase. Around 25 per cent had not achieved a Level 2 qualification and around two fifths had not achieved a Level 3 qualification.

These findings point to the need for continuing investment in learning in the post-19 (adult) phase. But they also point to the need to improve progression for some 'lower attainers' between 16 and 19.

Figure 2: Highest level of qualification achieved between 16 and 19, 'lower attainers' and all learners, 2015 cohort (%)



Source: National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record. Figures refer to the percentage of learners who have achieved a qualification at a particular level.

Starting at the right point is a key issue influencing progression

Overall a quarter of 'lower attainers' start their post-16 phase at Level 1 or below, considerably more than would be expected given levels of achievement at the end of KS4. Dropping back a level may be appropriate when starting a completely new area of study such as a vocational course, or to give breathing space or allow concentration on GCSE resits. But it will not be the best option for all young people and does constrain the progress that can be made by age 19. Learners with similar GCSE attainment who start their post-16 phase at Level 1 or Level 2 are much less likely to achieve a Level 3 qualification by 18 than young people who start on Level 3 qualifications. Even by age 19, young people who started on a Level 2 course or apprenticeship after Year 11 are still notably less likely to have achieved a Level 3 qualification, even though they would theoretically have had the time to do so.

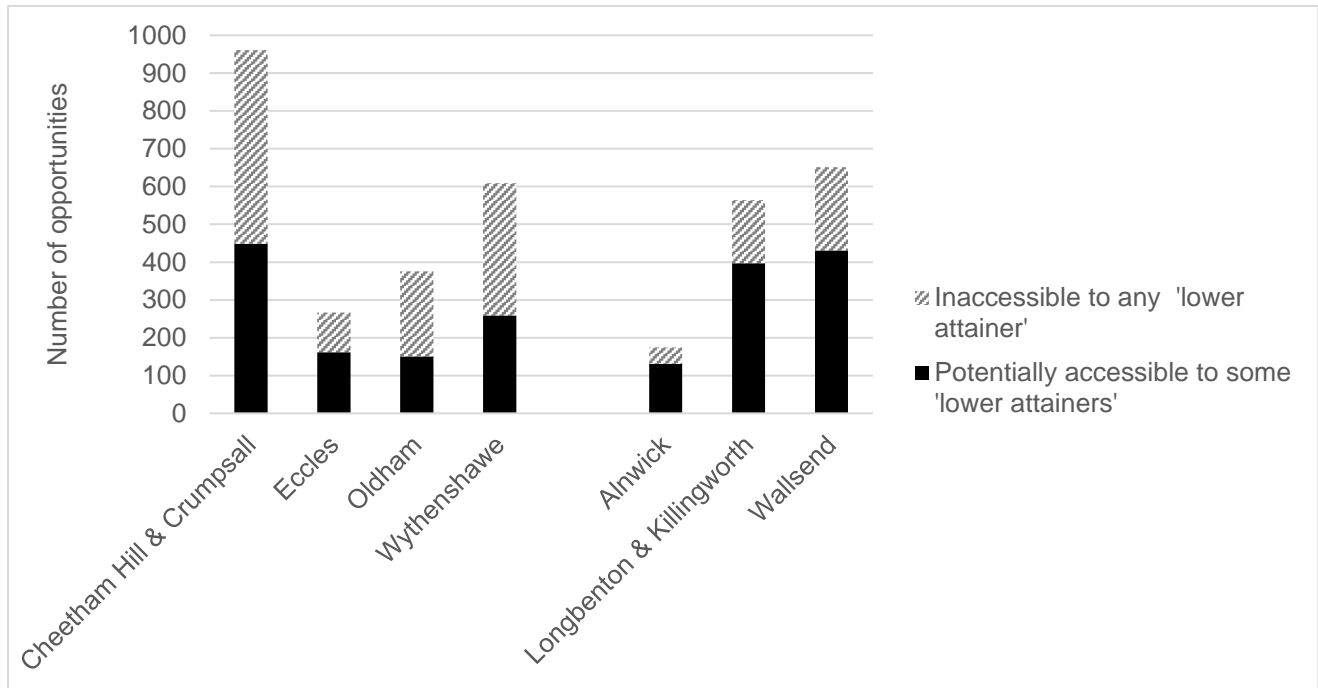
Provider type is a factor influencing the levels at which people start. Even within the same categories of prior attainment, 'lower attainers' who transition to FE colleges are more likely to start courses at Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2, in contrast to their peers who enrol in school sixth forms or sixth form colleges. This probably has to do, at least in part, with the fact that learners in FE colleges more often do vocational courses. These differences in starting points largely explain differences between provider types in the achievement of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications.

Place matters: Local variations affect what young people can achieve

Post-16 structures and practices vary substantially across the country, such that opportunities differ even between localities within the same local authority areas. There are differences in structures of provision and in what is offered. For example, in some areas school sixth forms and sixth form colleges have an exclusively academic offer. In others they offer substantial vocational options. Differences in entry requirements can also lead to differential access to options in different places, particularly with regard to Level 3, and therefore to the possibility that learners with similar attainment in different areas may follow different post-16 routes largely because of entry

requirement practices in their area. Figure 3 shows that, for those with some (between 1-4) GCSEs at grade 4/C, some Level 3 courses are accessible in some areas, but almost none in others.

Figure 3: Course opportunities at Level 3 in seven case study localities, by locality and accessibility (for 'lower attainers' with 1-4 GCSE grades at grade 4/C but neither English nor maths GCSE at grade 4/C)



Source: Dataset on opportunity sets constructed by the researchers, case study localities in Greater Manchester and North of Tyne.

Some variation is to be expected, as systems balance the needs of individual learners (including for portable qualifications to give access to wider opportunities) with current and future local labour market demands. However, our findings clearly show that these differences are affecting what people with similar attainment are able to achieve in different areas of the country. This suggests that the market for post-16 learning is working better in some places than others. Yet local areas have very limited data and intelligence capacity in order to monitor and understand how systems are working and changing locally; and limited powers, funding and capacity to coordinate provision, fill gaps and ensure learners are supported. Our data on entry requirements was collated by examining individual course requirements from individual providers as there is no centralised source for local authorities to monitor or for young people to refer to when making decisions.

Other local factors are important in influencing destinations and progression. These include actual travel times by public transport (such that well linked city centre provision was often perceived as more accessible than nearer opportunities), bus fares, discounts and other financial support with travel. There is a particular need to better understand patterns in rural areas and their distinct needs. Young people told us they were willing to travel for the right courses, but that existing transport arrangements often made that difficult to do.

Disadvantaged young people are over-represented among 'lower attainers' and some young people with multiple needs are very poorly served by the education system

GCSE 'lower attainment' is not exclusively associated with disadvantage. There are 'lower attainers' across the socio-economic spectrum and in all parts of the country. However, young people from poorer backgrounds as well as those with special educational needs (SEN) are overrepresented among 'lower attainers': 21 per cent of 'lower attainers' are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) compared with 8 per cent of non-lower attainers; and 31 per cent of 'lower attainers' have SEN compared with 6 per cent of non-lower attainers. Disadvantaged young people also have less advantageous post-16 transitions, even when comparing people with similar KS4 attainment. For example, young people eligible for FSM are less likely to be in apprenticeships and more likely to be classified as NEET/unknown.

Whilst we have shown that most 'lower attainers' have considerable KS4 achievements, there is a group of young people (around 20,000 or 1 in 29 of the whole cohort in 2015) who complete this stage without having achieved any passes at GCSE or equivalent. There is also a similar sized group who have some GCSEs at lower grades, but have not achieved at least five passes (i.e. full Level 1) – a traditional marker of a broad general education. Young people with SEN, or those eligible for FSM, are in the majority in these groups, and there are substantial minorities whose SEN status is not recorded, suggesting perhaps that they are recent arrivals or have had disrupted schooling careers. While we cannot establish the detail from the data available in the NPD/ILR, it is likely that many of these young people have faced or are facing immense challenges outside school.

Post-16 outcomes are particularly poor for these lowest attaining groups. Many are NEET for periods of their post-16 phase. Even among those who are engaging with education and training, there seems to be little progress made towards higher-level qualifications in their post-16 phase. A third do not achieve a Level 1 qualification between 16 and 19.

Without characterising all 'lower attainers' as having very low attainment and complex needs, it is essential that the system can identify and effectively support young people who do not fit its standard categories and pathways and need a great deal more time and support in moving from school to further learning and work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings challenge the assumption that it is purely lack of attainment in English and maths that is holding back 'lower attainers', rather than a lack of co-ordinated and accessible opportunities to develop and progress. English and maths are important but there needs to be a major policy shift away from the excessive focus on maximising GCSE attainment in core subjects towards supporting all young people to reach their potential given their existing achievements.

We recommend that:

1. England should develop a recognised Upper Secondary Education and Training Phase funded for three years from age 16-19. This would bring together the academic and vocational post-16 sub-systems (including apprenticeship) into one and allow adequate time for young people to prepare properly for the education and labour market trajectories they decide to pursue. Some individuals would need the whole three-year period, some less. There could be more opportunities to study for GCSEs beyond English and maths as well as time for work experience and volunteering. The T Level Transition Programme could be adapted and broadened to

enable more young people to experience and prepare for technical education and training pathways including apprenticeships. Young people with the lowest attainment, who often have additional needs, would enter the post-16 phase with a funded support plan.

2. Curriculum and accountability measures in KS4 should be changed to promote wider achievement, focus less heavily on English and maths GCSE and support a broader base for post-16 progression. English and maths should continue to be key elements, but young people who are not predicted to reach a grade C/4 in English and maths should not have their opportunities excessively narrowed by their prospects in these subjects. Consideration should be given to extending vocational provision in KS4 where this builds clear pathways to Level 2 courses post-16.
3. Local coordination mechanisms need to be strengthened to ensure that local systems of provision enable progression, meet labour market needs, and avoid people falling through the cracks created by provider decisions in competitive markets. Government should increase the capacity and funding of local areas to: analyse their local situation; construct post-16 progression routes that align with pre-16 provision, transport arrangements and local labour market needs; standardise practice in entry requirements ensuring that grade 4 in GCSE English and maths is only used as an entry threshold for courses and apprenticeships where there is a robust case; and establish much more effective careers information, advice and guidance services. It should make contingency and stimulus funding available at local level for the development of new forms of provision and to underwrite provision that has labour market value, but where demand fluctuates from year to year.
4. The characteristics and trajectories of 'lower attainers' need to be more visible if they are to be improved. DfE should publish more detailed and more accessible statistics on 'sub-benchmark' GCSE and equivalent attainment, and on outcomes in the post-16 phase, including more detail on attainment at Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2.

Further information

The research on which this report is based was carried out between 2018 and 2020 at the Universities of Manchester and Aberdeen, funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-founder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Visit www.nuffieldfoundation.org.

The full report and supporting data and working papers can be found at:
<https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/students-who-do-not-achieve-a-grade-c-or-above-in-english-and-maths>