

Request for expressions of interest

Positive deviance in education: Identifying factors that support the attainment of disadvantaged pupils

Opening date: 30th April 2026

Closing date: 22nd May 2026

Overview

Background

The EEF's mission is to break the link between family income and educational achievement. To do this, we generate and mobilise evidence that supports educators to improve practice and boost outcomes, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged pupils.

The EEF is commissioning an innovative research project applying a positive deviance approach to the question of why some primary and secondary schools achieve better attainment outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged pupils than other schools working in similar contexts. We are inviting research teams interested in undertaking this work to submit an expression of interest.

Positive deviance research aims to identify people or organisations that are achieving better outcomes than peers in similar circumstances with similar resources. By studying what these 'positive deviants' are doing differently, the approach aims to find out what behaviours or practices could be driving their success. By focusing on effective practice that already exists within the system, positive deviance research has the potential to surface cost-effective, contextually relevant solutions to complex problems.

Commissioning aims

The overall objective of this research is to identify school practices and behaviours with the potential to support the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in England. The appointed team will be tasked with developing a robust approach to the identification of positive deviant schools, taking into account contextual factors and school characteristics associated with school performance, and exploring behaviours and practices used in these schools to provide insights into what may enable them to outperform their peers.

Positive deviance research cannot provide causal evidence. However, we expect this project to identify behaviours and practices that could be tested through subsequent research. For instance, the EEF may look to commission School Choices evaluations¹ or programme evaluations to rigorously test the impact of the practices identified through this positive deviance project.

Existing evidence

The positive deviance method has its origins in health and nutrition research, where it has been used to help identify solutions to complex public health problems (LeMahieu et al., 2017). Uses of positive deviance methods in education are more limited, however, a recent UNICEF initiative, the **Data Must Speak** project, conducted positive deviance studies in 15 low- and middle-income countries, focusing on why some schools perform better than

¹ For more information on the School Choices approach, see this [EEF blog](#).

others within each country. UNICEF also conducted a methodological review on the use of positive deviance approaches as part of this work.

School effectiveness research has also long sought to understand why some schools achieve better outcomes than others, particularly after controlling for pupil intake and socio-economic background (e.g. Rutter et al., 1979; Mortimore et al. 1988; Hattie et al., 2009). We expect the appointed team to take into account learnings from this literature when designing this study, to ensure that it productively builds on prior work in the field.

Evaluation considerations

To address the research objectives of this project, we propose a mixed methods research design drawing on the positive deviance approach used in the UNICEF Data Must Speak initiative. The appointed team will be expected to refine the proposed methodology, including identifying relevant outcomes and school performance indicators to align with the English education system in consultation with relevant stakeholders and education experts.

Research questions

For this project, we have identified three preliminary research questions. However, the research questions are not exhaustive, and we welcome additional questions that could deepen our understanding of school-level practices and behaviours, particularly those relating to specific areas such as school leadership, teaching and classroom practices, school culture and climate and other contextual factors that may contribute to improved outcomes.

- How do the practices and behaviours observed in primary and secondary schools identified as ‘positive deviants’ based on their attainment outcomes for socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils differ from those observed in comparable schools?
- What practices and behaviours may be enabling these schools to achieve better attainment outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged pupils than other schools operating in similar contexts and with comparable resources?
- What factors enable schools to adopt these practices and behaviours?

Research design

The positive deviance study would adopt a mixed-methods approach. We recommend drawing on the methodology used in UNICEF’s Data Must Speak initiative, which has been conducted across multiple countries to identify practices and behaviours that enable some schools to perform better than others, although we are open to teams suggesting adaptations to the approach or alternative approaches. We anticipate that the research design would include the following stages:

- a) **Analysis of resources and context associated with school performance:** The study is likely to begin by identifying one or more key education outcomes of interest, such as attainment for disadvantaged pupils at Key Stage 2 or Key Stage 4 or subject specific achievement. These outcomes could be selected based on research priorities, policy relevance and the availability of reliable and comparable data across schools. Large scale administrative datasets including the National Pupil Database (NPD), school census data or other relevant education data sources will need to be used to examine the relationship between school outcomes and contextual, structural and resource-related variables. Potential factors as highlighted in UNICEF’s country reports included class size, teacher qualification and experience, school leadership characteristics and pupil demographic characteristics among others. The variability of school performance over time may also need to be considered. Statistical models like prediction models can be used to estimate expected performance given the school’s context for each school in the sample. As part of this stage of the project, there may be opportunities to draw on the Department for Education’s ongoing work to analyse and learn from school

performance data, including their recent work to develop **School Profiles**. The appointed team will have an opportunity to meet with the relevant DfE team to discuss this during the project set-up period.

- b) **Identification of positive deviant schools:** Schools whose performance for disadvantaged pupils consistently exceeds their expected performance will be identified as positive deviants. To differentiate from a case study approach, we would suggest matching these schools with close peers working in similar contexts but with lower outcomes, to compare and isolate factors or practices that may contribute to stronger outcomes. The main variables used for school matching will depend on the available data and their importance in influencing school performance.
- c) **Understanding school-level positive deviant practices/ behaviours:** To understand the mechanisms underlying positive deviance, both quantitative and qualitative methods could be employed. While quantitative methods could be considered to measure factors not reported in the available datasets, qualitative methods will allow for deeper exploration of the practices used within schools. These can include surveys, questionnaires, focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and classroom and school observations from purposively sampled school-level stakeholders such as teachers, school leadership teams, parents, pupils and trust or local authority representatives (if applicable). We anticipate that a robust conceptual framework informed by wider literature would be used for this stage of the project. Findings from the quantitative and qualitative analyses should be integrated to develop a comprehensive understanding of the practices and behaviours associated with higher than expected school performance, and the factors that enable schools to adopt these practices and behaviours. We expect teams to not just identify case studies of practices in positive deviant schools, but to make systematic comparisons to schools with lower outcomes, to ensure that the research identifies differentiating factors rather than just cataloguing practices that are consistent between positive deviant schools and comparative settings.

This final stages of positive deviance research often focus on investigating levers for scale, including exploring how effective practices can be encouraged and adopted more broadly. We anticipate that the EEF would take forward this stage of the work after the completion of the commissioned project, potentially after more rigorously testing the impact of some of the identified practices.

We expect that the main output of the externally commissioned project would be a research report published on the EEF's website. We expect that positive deviant schools and comparison schools would not be identifiable in the report.

While these stages are indicative of the steps that can be taken within the positive deviance approach to identify and further explore practices in positive deviant schools, we welcome suggestions for different methods of identification and analysis that may provide additional insights within the English education system.

As part of the design for this research, it may be useful for teams to consider:

- Opportunities to purposefully incorporate stakeholder consultation or co-creation into the study design. Given the innovative nature of this project, we anticipate appointing a Study Advisory Board to provide input at key points in the study.
- Drawing on existing literature, including UNICEF's methodological review on positive deviance research and school effectiveness literature, to ensure that the approach to selecting positive deviant schools and understanding school level positive deviant behaviours builds on existing work and adopts a robust, theory-led approach.
- The role of school culture in shaping practices and behaviours, and implications of this for the research.

Commissioning process

Who should apply?

Research teams with experience of conducting mixed methods research in education, particularly with a focus on disadvantaged pupil attainment, are invited to submit expressions of interest.

We are interested in expressions of interest from single research teams and/or consortia with complementary expertise and where the consortium can demonstrate that they will work well together to ensure the quality and efficiency of the project. This call for expressions of interest is open; researchers do not need to be part of EEF's panel of evaluators.

We accept applications from legally constituted organisations and not from individuals. The organisation does not have to be based in England, but if not based there, we would expect you to demonstrate the partnerships and knowledge required to work with English schools.

Research management

The EEF will oversee the management of funded projects, and research teams will be expected to follow the EEF's **guidance for evaluators**, where relevant to the study design.

The study will be supported by an independent Study Advisory Board, who will provide feedback and advice to the research team around the design of the study whilst ensuring the highest standards of rigour and research quality. Additionally, the Study Advisory Board will ensure alignment with relevant ethical procedures and contribute to mitigating any conflicts of interest that may arise.

Members of the Study Advisory Board will be selected jointly by the appointed research team and the EEF.

What does a successful application look like?

The application process is divided into two separate phases, an **i) Expression of Interest (EOI) phase** and a **ii) Proposal phase**, each with their own considerations.

At a high level, a successful **EOI** should:

- Provide a **high-level overview on the preferred approach** to answering the specified research questions.
- Involve a **strong team** with prior experience of research in similar contexts, including quantitative analysis of secondary datasets in education, qualitative methods and design of theory-led data collection and analysis frameworks. Please include full CVs of all proposed team members, highlighting relevant expertise.
- Be no more than **2,000 words long**, excluding references and CVs (indicative length, the focus should be on quality rather than quantity).

In addition to the above, a successful **proposal** will:

- Provide a **more detailed description of the research approach** that you are proposing.
- Summarise relevant existing evidence.
- Research teams should outline what aspects of their research questions or proposed methodology require further refinement and why, i.e. **where there are uncertainties**. Proposals should then outline how research teams propose to collect information to address these uncertainties.
- Describe key **ethical considerations** for the research design to the extent that they are known at this stage.
- Describe the research team's approach to considering issues of **diversity and inclusion** in their research design and implementation. This could include, for example, reflections on whether some groups are expected to be more or less able to engage with or benefit from the approach, and how that can be

explored through design. It may also include reflections on the team's approach to carrying out culturally and racially sensitive fieldwork.

- Represent **good value for money**. No indicative budget will be provided as part of the invitation to tender for this study and proposals will be assessed on their value for money in relation to the proposed evaluation design. We expect this project to fall outside the scope for VAT. All applications must attach a budget spreadsheet with reasonable disaggregation across phases and cost categories. Our grant funding is restricted to cover activities supporting your proposed project and cannot be used to cover costs that have already been incurred. The EEF will provide a budget template at proposal stage.
- Be no more than **7,000 words long**, excluding references (indicative length, the focus should be on quality rather than quantity)

What criteria will be used to award funding?

The EEF will assess applications in line with the two phases presented above. Research teams with a successful **EOI** will be invited to submit a more in-depth **Proposal**. Each respective phase will be scored by the EEF's team under the following criteria.

Phase 1 – Expression of interest

EOIs will be assessed against the following criteria, for which an equal weighting will apply:

- The research team collectively has both excellent methodological expertise and prior research and/or practical expertise related to the area being investigated.
- The proposed research approach to answering the research question is well defined and aligned with the EEF's commissioning priorities.

Table 1 – Scoring criteria

Scoring criteria	
0	Totally fails to meet the requirement - information not available
1	Meets some of the requirements with limited supporting information
2	Meets some of the requirements with reasonable explanation
3	Fully meets the requirements with detailed explanation and evidence
4	Exceeds the requirements with extensive explanation and evidence

Phase 2 – Proposal

Proposals will be assessed against the following criteria, each with their respective weighting and under the same scoring scale as for EOIs (see Table 1 above for reference).

- Capability and relevant experience of core project team (35%)**
 - The proposed team demonstrates a track record of delivering similar research (i.e., in line with the approach the team is proposing).
 - The proposed team demonstrates experience in conducting qualitative and quantitative research in educational settings, including experience analysing administrative datasets such as the National Pupil Database (NPD).
 - The proposed team demonstrates understanding of the evidence/existing research, context and expertise that are relevant for the project.

- The proposal describes a clear structure of the core research team, defining roles and responsibilities that are in line with their experience and expertise as well as the specific tasks involved in the proposed research activities.

II. **Methodology and approach** (50%)

- The proposed research questions are well defined, including clearly describing the population, definitions, and outcomes, where applicable, and is highly relevant to schools serving disadvantaged pupils.
- The proposed design will provide high quality evidence to support answering the identified research questions.
- The proposal describes which aspects of the research questions or design are uncertain, and these uncertainties will be addressed, including planned research activities and participant engagement strategies.
- The methodological decisions are feasible, appropriate, and well-justified, including adequate consideration of how positive deviant will be identified, how comparable groups of schools will be created, and how qualitative data will be analysed.
- The data collection approaches proposed are robust and suitable to the study aims (i.e., outlines instruments, data collection methods, sampling procedures, analysis approaches, etc). If new research instruments will be designed, an appropriate strategy for developing these is proposed.
- The proposal describes the research team's approach to research ethics and data protection, including but not limited to GDPR compliance, specifying legal bases for processing personal and special category data, and the team's approach to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and how they can be incorporated into the design and execution of the evaluation.
- Key risks to project delivery are identified and appropriate strategies to mitigate these risks are proposed.
- A feasible timeline for the project is proposed, including timings for key project stages and activities.
- A robust strategy for the recruitment of schools to the project is proposed.

III. **Value for money** (15%)

- Detailed cost of your proposal and how this demonstrates value for money are provided. Allocations of staff time are clearly presented.

The EEF may follow-up with research teams that submit strong proposals to arrange a meeting and discuss proposals further before coming to a final decision.

How to apply

Interested applicants should submit their **EOI** by completing our application form [here](#) by 5pm on 22nd May.

If you have any questions, please contact aoife.duff@eefoundation.org.uk and anushka.srivastava@eefoundation.org.uk

Timeline

The timeline for the commissioning process will be as follows:

Deadline for EOIs	22 nd May 2026
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Shortlisted applicants invited to submit full proposals	12th June 2026
Deadline for full proposals	10th July 2026
Selected applicant notified	4 th August 2026
Set up meetings	August 2026
Project plan and budget submitted to EEF's Grants Committee for review and sign off	September 2026

Ideally, the appointed research team would deliver a first draft of the final report by late 2027. However, we are open to discussing this and would encourage teams to propose a suggested timeline based on their capacity and proposed research design.

References

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London, England: Routledge.

LeMahieu, P. G., Nordstrum, L. E., & Gale, D. (2017). Positive deviance: Learning from positive anomalies. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 25(1), 109–124.

Lévano, L., Chavez, C., Fortin, A., Pesando, L. M., & Comba, R. (2022). *A methodological review for the Data Must Speak positive deviance research: Insights from positive deviance, behavioural sciences, implementation research, and scaling science*. Florence, Italy: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

Mortimore, P., Sammons, P., Stoll, L., Lewis, D., & Ecob, R. (1988). *School matters: The junior years*. Wells, England: Open Books.

Rutter, M., Maughan, B., Mortimore, P., Ouston, J., & Smith, A. (1979). *Fifteen thousand hours: Secondary schools and their effects on children*. London, England: Open Books.