



Equity Case Studies

**Palladian Academy
Trust: Changing
the Language of
Disadvantage**

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Reframing culture to support learners experiencing disadvantage



At a glance

Context: 13 primary and secondary schools across Bath and North East Somerset and Wiltshire

Equity focus: Improving outcomes for pupils from under-resourced backgrounds by changing how disadvantage is understood and discussed

Key strategy: Trust-wide shift in language, culture and professional understanding

Who led it: CEO and Director of Education, supported by Disadvantage Leads and school leaders

What changed: More consistent language, stronger shared understanding, clearer focus on equity in practice



The challenge we were trying to solve

Palladian Academy Trust serves 3,965 pupils across a diverse mix of urban and rural communities. Around 18.4 per cent of pupils meet the government definition of disadvantage (PP), though this varies widely by school. In some settings, disadvantage is highly visible; in others, particularly in Bath and rural Wiltshire, it is often hidden within otherwise affluent communities.

Across the Trust, 24.6 per cent of pupils are identified as having SEND, with particularly high concentrations in some schools, including specialist provision. Leaders recognised that disadvantage frequently intersects with SEND and social care involvement, but that these experiences are not captured well by single labels or proxies.

Despite strong overall attainment, gaps between pupils from under-resourced backgrounds and their peers persisted. Leaders concluded that interventions alone were insufficient. The deeper issue was how disadvantage was understood, talked about and acted upon across the Trust.



What we did

The Trust began by treating data as the start of a conversation, not the end. Leaders focused first on culture and language, recognising that how staff frame disadvantage shapes expectations and practice.

The Trust established internal networks, including a Disadvantage Leads Network, initially bringing

together senior leaders and colleagues responsible for pupil premium strategy. These groups built shared understanding by interrogating definitions, assumptions and proxies, and by openly debating concepts such as equity, equality, social mobility and social justice.

Professional dialogue was deliberately challenging. Professional learning focused on building shared understanding rather than compliance. Photographic stimulus was often used in workshops and sessions, asking participants to consider the language that they may have heard and to share this.

A deliberate shift was made away from deficit-based labels towards language that foregrounded context. Rather than referring to “disadvantaged pupils”, the Trust adopted the term **learners experiencing disadvantage** emphasising that disadvantage is situational, changeable and shaped by wider systems.



Why this mattered for equity

Hidden disadvantage was a recurring theme across Trust schools. In communities where deprivation is less visible, pupils experiencing greater disadvantage were at higher risk of being overlooked or misunderstood.

By reframing disadvantage as contextual rather than fixed, the Trust aimed to reduce unconscious bias, raise expectations and ensure that support was shaped by pupils’ lived experiences rather than narrow proxies. The intention was not to lower standards, but to create fairer conditions for success.



What made it work

Leaders modelled vulnerability and reflection. Staff were encouraged to examine their own assumptions without judgement, supported by carefully designed professional learning activities.

The work was consistently evidence-informed. Nothing was presented as opinion; all discussions were grounded in research and data, helping to build trust and credibility.

Leadership was distributed. While the Trust set the direction, schools were supported to interpret and apply shared principles in ways that reflected their local contexts.



Barriers and challenges

Some colleagues initially questioned whether changing language would make a meaningful difference, particularly in schools with strong overall attainment. Others held implicit assumptions about ability and background that needed to be highlighted and addressed carefully through evidence and professional dialogue.

Hidden disadvantage also posed difficulties. In more affluent communities, pupils experiencing disadvantage were less visible and more likely to be overlooked, while reliance on familiar proxies risked reinforcing assumptions rather than deepening understanding. Sustaining consistent language across a growing Trust required ongoing reinforcement, particularly as new staff and leaders joined.



What changed

Across the Trust, leaders report more consistent and thoughtful conversations about disadvantage. Language has shifted away from labels applied to pupils towards a focus on circumstances, barriers and support.

Attainment for pupils experiencing greater disadvantage has improved alongside improvements for all pupils. External review confirmed rising outcomes, while also highlighting that closing gaps remains ongoing work.

Importantly, the work has strengthened coherence across schools, particularly around transition, inclusion and expectations.



What we'd do differently/advice to others

Start with culture, not initiatives. **Language shapes expectations, and expectations shape outcomes.**

Expect resistance. Some colleagues may initially doubt that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds can achieve as highly as their peers. These beliefs need to be addressed carefully, using evidence and high expectations.

Be clear that equity is not a zero-sum game. High-quality adaptive teaching benefits all pupils, not just those facing disadvantage.

Above all, recognise that this is long-term work. Cultural change takes time, but it lays the foundation for sustained improvement.

