

Animal clubs and yoga lessons boost deprived pupils' GCSE results

Nicola Woolcock Education Editor

More than 50,000 white working-class children are set to finish secondary school without passing core subjects this year.

Analysis of official figures shows that less than 20 per cent of all white British teenagers from deprived homes will leave school with at least a grade 4 in both English and maths GCSE and, if nothing changes, nearly one million disadvantaged white pupils currently in school will leave without the qualifications.

However, one secondary school in a predominantly white area is using yoga classes, Scottish dancing and a wild animal club — as well as keeping its doors open for nine hours a day — to help pupils flourish.

About 10 per cent of pupils at Catmose College, a rural school near the market town of Oakham in Rutland, are white British and from deprived homes.

Ensuring their success is a personal mission for the principal, Stuart Williams, the son of a cleaner and bus driver who first went abroad as a 21-year-old teacher on a school trip to France.

At the vast majority of schools in England, white working-class British pupils do worse than expected at GCSE level based on their performance at the end of primary school. This measure is called Progress 8. At Catmose, they do better than expected, achieving an equivalent of a tenth of a grade higher in each GCSE subject.

Williams, the head for 17 years, said children on free school meals were a "broad group" with very different experiences among white rural and coastal communities compared with first-generation immigrants. "An awful lot of the way that we approach things here stems from my own experiences," he said. "I'm a product of a white British working-class comprehensive school."

Growing up in Liverpool in the 1980s, his views and aspirations were shaped by friends from middle-class families whose parents took him to the theatre, sports events and to hear the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. His family could not afford school lunches, but his parents were too proud to apply for free meals, which has led him to support auto-enrolment for those who qualify.

Pupils can come into school from 8am and stay until 5pm, free of charge. "There are always senior staff here, we want our school to be welcoming and don't want children to feel there's any barrier to coming in. No areas are out of bounds, they can access any classroom,

play the piano in the music practice rooms, use computers if they haven't got access to a good computer at home."

Williams has broadened access to extracurricular activities by setting up a programme of electives on Wednesday afternoons instead of lessons. The art, culture or sports courses last six weeks and include French conversation, astronomy club, horse care, wild animal club, ceramics, Scottish dancing, hiking and yoga. Activities are free or heavily subsidised for those on free meals. "We want every child to have those experiences so they actually look forward to coming into school," Williams said.

Disadvantaged pupils have "assertive mentoring" from a senior member of staff, who is "like a good parent on site". They meet every week throughout GCSE years to oversee revision and talk about career aspirations.

Williams added: "We don't have au-



Catmose College pupils can take part in activities like the wild animal club

thoritarian silence on the corridors. We manage our students in a very similar way that we would our own children, with very high expectations."

Chulmleigh College in Devon has a 99 per cent white British pupil roll, with about 18 per cent from deprived backgrounds. It has a well above average Progress 8 rating and a positive rating for that group equal to achieving 0.17 grades higher than expected across all GCSEs. Michael Johnson, its head, said: "Schools have to do increasingly elaborate things, but we've tried to take that away and focus on making sure children leave with good results." Tactics include silent study and prep time. The school focuses on the curriculum introduced by Michael Gove and nearly all pupils take the English baccalaureate suite of qualifications: English, maths, a science, a language and history or geography. "That's been critical for the achievement of disadvantaged children," Johnson said. "We put a massive emphasis on literacy."