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'THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS'

- 46 free school projects cancelled and 58 still in limbo
- DfE to divert cash to councils to create places instead
- Leaders question decision to can 'ready to go' projects

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SCHOOLS
WEEK

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Freddie Whittaker
DEPUTY EDITOR

Samantha Booth
CHIEF REPORTER



Our enduring commitment to our readers and schools

We're over the moon to have been appointed as Schools Week's next editor and deputy editor, taking up our roles in January.

Many of you will already know us. We've both worked at Schools Week for many years. But we wanted to take the opportunity to set out our vision for our brilliant publication, and how we intend to engage with our loyal readers.

Independent, authoritative and fearless journalism has never been more necessary at a time when so much of our society is fracturing, and when so much more is being asked of our schools and those who work within them.

We want to start by paying tribute to everyone who works in schools. From support staff to teachers, leaders, business and governance professionals and volunteers, you are the lifeblood of our community.

We've been overwhelmed by the skill and professionalism with which you've dealt with the huge challenges of the last few years.

We remember speaking to you every day while the impact of the Covid pandemic ripped through your schools. You put yourselves in harm's way to ensure pupils could continue to learn. You worked overtime to ensure they got exam grades.

You ran testing centres, vaccination centres and became part-time health professionals. You kept our school system together while politicians partied in Westminster. You are owed a huge debt of gratitude.

We know the years since have been hard too. We've lurched from a global pandemic into a cost of living crisis from which schools are far from immune. Again, you continue to show remarkable fortitude as you tackle these challenges head-on, but we know it is taking its toll.

Despite some promising recent movements in teacher recruitment, too many brilliant people are leaving the schools community because of overworking, stress and burnout.

The government has taken some positive steps

towards making the job more manageable, but some of that will take years to take effect.

We also know that problems in society more widely are making the job more difficult.

Worsening behaviour. Abuse from parents. Increasing demand for SEND support without the resources to match. Cuts to services around schools. The increasing prevalence of hate and intolerance, particularly online.

Schools are grappling with far more than was ever expected of them before.

As we take Schools Week into 2026, we will continue to highlight the day-to-day difficulties of the job you do.

We will champion your successes, highlight potential solutions to the challenges you face and hold government, Ofsted and other agencies to account on your behalf.

But we will also continue to hold up a mirror to the sector, acting as a critical friend. It is right that we investigate and expose wrongdoing by schools. We know it only occurs in a small minority, and if it continues unchecked, it can tarnish the reputation of the majority that do the right thing.

We both began our careers on local newspapers, so we know the crucial role schools play in their communities.

We rely on those working in schools and those in the areas they serve to bring things to our attention – both good and bad.

If you know of a success in the sector that has gone uncelebrated, let us know. If you are concerned about poor practice, we want to hear from you. We are particularly keen to hear from voices currently under-represented in the conversation about schools policy.

2026 is going to be a critical year for education. There's a white paper on the way and essential but tricky SEND reforms coming down the tracks, while the new national curriculum will begin to take shape.

Our aim is to help guide you through it, translating government waffle and spin into facts and analysis. We can't wait to get started.

Most read online this week:



- 1** [Income data to replace free school meals as trigger for disadvantage funding](#)
- 2** [Success of top academy achieved 'at too high a cost for some pupils'](#)
- 3** [Good might not be good enough under new Ofsted framework](#)
- 4** [Hard maths for ministers as pupil numbers set to fall 6%](#)
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SCHOOLS WEEK

School leaders' most-read: Teacher Tapp survey in June of 607 headteachers on education media read in past month

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NEWS

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Dozens of free schools scrapped, many more in limbo

SAMANTHA BOOTH

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Two-thirds of mainstream free school projects and 18 special schools face the axe, with 58 more specialist settings thrown into limbo after a year-long government review.

The Department for Education has confirmed 28 of 44 mainstream free school plans that were placed under review when Labour entered government last year are now set to be dropped.

Meanwhile, just 15 out of 92 planned special and alternative provision (AP) free schools are definitely going ahead.

Councils will be given the choice on whether to proceed with another 58 specialist projects, or receive per-pupil cash to create places in existing schools.

Eighteen special schools planned under the free schools programme will definitely be scrapped, with funding diverted to local authorities.

Councils have welcomed the news, but school leaders have slammed ministers for the decision amid a chronic shortage of special school places.

Warren Carratt, CEO of Nexus Multi-Academy Trust which runs 19 special schools, described the news as "the nightmare before Christmas" for the specialist sector.

He blasted the decision to allow councils "the chance to cut and run with the money earmarked for these schools".

Free school plans scrapped

Last year, the government paused plans for 44 new mainstream free schools – a flagship policy of the previous government – after launching a review into whether they offered value for money.

Today, the government confirmed just 16 of the projects will proceed, with 28 moving into the "minded to cancel" phase. Trusts and councils can appeal this decision.

Scrapping the projects is estimated to save the government around £600 million. The DfE said its decision would help "prioritise investment in specialist places".

Among those facing cancellation is Perranporth Academy – a planned secondary school in Cornwall, whose website still says it is "opening autumn 2026".

The academy was going to be a "flagship" school for inclusive



Sir Hamid Patel CBE

Perranporth Academy, artist's impression



education, with a purpose-built "SEND hub" and resource base – something the Labour government is pushing for more of.

CEO Dr Jenny Blunden said the trust was "really disappointed".

"We have huge numbers of housing needing to be built and short-term decision making by this government that will mean Cornish children will be worse off as a result of this.

Plans were "ready to go" when projects were paused last summer.

"There had been a huge amount of money spent on feasibility study...that is essentially government money that has gone completely to waste."

Among the projects reviewed were three selective sixth forms in Dudley, Oldham and Middlesbrough proposed by Eton College and Star Academies. The Middlesbrough project will now not proceed.

Sir Hamid Patel CBE, chief executive of Star Academies, said the trust was "delighted" three of its five free school projects have been confirmed, and understood "the rationale for not progressing the other two projects".

The government had faced growing calls to reveal its plans, including from the New Schools Network, a charity that supports and lobbies for free schools.

Its director Meg Powell-Chandler said the organisation "regret[s] the decision to cancel a number of projects, and remain concerned that uncertainty persists for 77 vital special and AP free school proposals that would provide much-needed, high-quality specialist places."

Councils given say over special schools

Councils will be able to decide whether to carry on with plans to build the 58 special and AP free schools now in limbo or receive cash to

create places. For the 18 cancelled specialist free schools, which were at an early stage with no trust approved, they will automatically receive money.

The DfE says this would help accommodate children "often more quickly" than waiting for free schools to be built, as it can take years to open new schools. Carratt questioned the government's focus on placing SEND pupils in mainstream schools "when special schools up and down the country are at breaking point".

Several of those schools in limbo are in "safety valve" areas – where councils sign multimillion pound bailout deals for sweeping SEND reforms.

The DfE's own data revealed that about two thirds of special schools are over capacity.

The department said it would deliver on all 10,000 places "in all areas" that were due to be created by the planned special free schools.

Amanda Hopgood, of the Local Government Association, welcomed the news special schools "will be funded or councils will be given money to develop their own provision".

The DfE has also confirmed £3 billion in funding over four years for councils to create more specialist places – in special or mainstream schools – from next financial year. This is on top of £740 million for this financial year.

Applications will also open in the new year for a further 250 rebuilding projects.

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of school leaders' union NAHT, said: "This additional investment should mean that, in time, more children and young people receive the provision and education that they need and deserve.

But he said investment in buildings are "only one part of the picture", adding government must ensure there are "sufficient teachers and leaders with the right level of specialist training".

NEWS

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Income replacing free school meals as deprivation funding measure

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

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EXCLUSIVE

Family income data will replace free school meals as the trigger for pupil premium and other deprivation funding for schools.

The major shake-up was quietly confirmed by the government. But experts have warned the “the devil will be in the detail” amid calls for clarity about how government will assess income.

Pupil premium funding – worth almost £3 billion annually – is paid to schools for every child eligible for free school meals (FSM) within the previous six years, or have been in care.

FSM eligibility is used to allocate other disadvantage funding through the national funding formula (NFF).

Schools Week revealed earlier this week that the government had quietly announced a major change, buried in a 299-page Treasury report.

“The [Department for Education] will design a new model for targeting disadvantage funding by using income data to directly allocate pupil premium and NFF deprivation funding,” it said. “This will replace the use of free school meals claims within the last six years as the economic eligibility criteria...and enable it to tilt funding towards the most entrenched disadvantage.”

The DfE has declined to share further detail, but it comes after ministers said in June that they were reviewing how pupil premium is allocated.

The Treasury report says the DfE will do this “while maintaining the overall amount it spends on tackling the challenges faced by children with additional needs”.

Concerns over income data

Questions have been raised over how parental income will be calculated.

The DfE and Cabinet Office previously commissioned Durham University to carry out research into a “pupil parent matched dataset” (PPMD), which links household income data from the Department for Work and Pensions to the national pupil database. Findings published in May suggest none of the versions of income available through the PPMD are “suitable for



substantive analysis”.

Professor Stephen Gorard, who authored the study with Professor Nadia Siddiqui, said the PPMD “provides a marvellous opportunity for researchers to address enduring questions”, including “how indicators of disadvantage such as free school meals relate to household income [and] which are the best predictors of student attainment”.

“However, the version we are working on does not yet seem ready to base policy on.”

Gorard said there were “a relatively large number of households whose family structure is unknown...or where an adult’s income is unknown”.

The researchers found some adults had “a very large negative income, such as such as minus £5 million”.

“In theory, these meet the definition for disadvantage...but it is not clear that this is valid,” said Gorard.

Schools Week asked the DfE if it plans to use the PPMD or another dataset to calculate family income. It also asked if Durham University’s research was considered when deciding to press ahead with the reforms. It declined to respond.

Issues with FSM as proxy

Only families with pre-benefits income below £7,400 can claim FSM. Around one-quarter of

pupils qualify.

Jon Andrews, head of analysis at the Education Policy Institute (EPI), said: “Our research has shown that many families currently entitled to FSM are not registered for their entitlement.”

Another 500,000 pupils are expected to qualify next September when FSM is extended to households receiving universal credit. These pupils will not attract pupil premium funding.

“There has not been a clear rationale from government as to why,” said Andrews.

Andy Jolley, a school food and poverty campaigner, said FSM is a “poor proxy”, becoming “more detached from identifying children in poverty”.

He said the six-year rule for pupil premium meant short periods of unemployment for high earners could “distort” the picture, while children living “in destitution” but not claiming FSM do not attract funding.

Clarity needed

Charlotte O'Regan, senior schools engagement manager at the Sutton Trust, welcomed “any attempt to make the pupil premium process more accurate and helpful”, but added the system must “be as simple as possible so that parents understand whether their children qualify for pupil premium”.

She said many “could be missing out on support for things like school trips”, and called for clarity on whether FSM will be used as a priority measure for school admissions.

John Jerrim, professor of education and social statistics at University College London, said while FSM “captures disadvantaged only”, family income “allows one to look potentially at those across the income spectrum”.

Mark Unwin, a former MAT chief executive, said the new system should account for “geography [and] projected educational outcomes”.

Dan Morrow, CEO of Cornwall Education Learning Trust, said the new metric would help recognise families who are “just about managing”, but added: “We need to know the mechanisms for information sharing and identification so that this does not lead to a bureaucratic burden for schools.”

NEWS

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Ofqual: digital exams could be launched by 2030

RUTH LUCAS

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On-screen exams could be introduced for some GCSE and A-level subjects by 2030, the head of Ofqual has said, in a big step towards making exams digital.

Ofqual plans to allow exam boards to introduce up to two on-screen specifications for GCSEs and A-level qualifications with fewer than 100,000 entries per year.

Chief regulator Sir Ian Bauckham said it was “important to start small” and that Ofqual will “have a very close eye to fairness” when assessing proposals.

The news comes after a three-year-long research project by the regulator and the Department for Education, published on Thursday, identified “potential benefits” but “significant challenges” for on-screen exams.

Ofqual has launched a consultation on its proposals running until March 5. The regulator then plans to hold a technical consultation next year. If plans proceed, exam boards can then submit proposals.

Boards have praised Ofqual’s “rigorous approach” despite plans limiting the scope of subjects eligible for on-screen assessments.

What subjects could have on-screen assessments?

Exam boards were developing plans for on-screen assessments – but announced a delay in December 2024. All required Ofqual approval.

Pearson Edexcel wanted to give students the choice to take GCSE language and literature on-screen in summer 2025, and OCR had plans to launch a digitally assessed computer science GCSE.

AQA had published proposals for parts of GCSE Italian and Polish to be assessed digitally by 2026, with plans for more popular subjects to be partly on-screen assessed in 2030.

However, Ofqual’s proposal means most GCSE subjects would not be eligible for on-screen assessments.

Eligible subjects would include German, which had 32,430 entries last academic year, design and technology (77,770 entries), physical education (79,285 entries), food preparation and



nutrition (55,035 entries) and drama (48,650 entries).

For A-level subjects, only maths (105,755 entries) would be disqualified for on-screen assessment, as all other subjects had below 100,000 entries.

Bauckham told *Schools Week*: “The first step here is the introduction of specific regulation, and that’s because, at the moment, there is no regulation to manage the entry of on-screen qualifications into the market.”

He said it was “important to start small” by targeting GCSE subjects with lower uptakes, as it “would be lower stakes and easier for schools to deliver”.

On what subjects may be chosen, Bauckham said: “We think it’s going to be a range. We’re not absolutely certain that all of them are going to submit specifications either. Developing a new specification does require resource that they will have to put in.”

On-screen and paper versions would be offered as separate qualifications, but it is not clear whether schools could offer both.

‘A pragmatic way forward’

Exam boards have welcomed Ofqual’s proposals, but have not said which subjects they would choose.

AQA chief executive Colin Hughes said: “We recognise there are concerns about issues such as fairness, sockets and space. That’s why we believe that digital exams should be introduced in a measured, paced way, beginning with

subjects for which digital delivery offers a clear benefit, and where the shift is least disruptive”.

Myles McGinley, managing director of Cambridge OCR, said Ofqual’s “regulatory approach should be robust while allowing for innovation where it improves assessment experience”.

OCR said it will continue its work on a fully on-screen computer science GCSE and consider other suitable subjects.

Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson said in a letter to Bauckham that she agreed with the approach of only allowing on-screen assessments for less popular subjects. Phillipson said transitions to on-screen assessments should be “phased and controlled”.

‘Very close eye to fairness’

The exams regulator will publish guidance on platforms and devices that would be suitable for use in on-screen exams. Pupils would not be able to use their own device.

Bauckham said when assessing proposals, Ofqual “will have a very close eye to fairness, and anything that is demonstrably going to increase unfairness will be pushed back, and they’ll be asked to think again before they can market it to schools and colleges”.

Schools will be given three years with an assessment specification before an exam takes place.

This means the first-on screen assessment would likely be taken towards the end of the decade, Ofqual said.

‘Significant challenges’

Research carried out by Ofqual and the DfE found “potential benefits such as improved accessibility, particularly for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), greater operational efficiency, and alignment with a digital society”.

However, there are “significant challenges” including “unequal access to digital technology, inconsistent IT infrastructure, technical risks and concerns about fairness, standards and delivery”.

Most schools do not have enough suitable devices to support large-scale delivery of on-screen assessments, research found.

INVESTIGATION: INCLUSION

Identifying inclusion: Lessons for Labour from councils and charities

SAMANTHA BOOTH

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INVESTIGATES

Government officials are exploring how to demonstrate a school's inclusivity within its community.

This could form part of new "school profiles", aimed at providing parents and the public with "clear, reliable information".

What data exists on inclusion and what should ministers consider?

Schools Week investigates...

The Labour government came in with a mission on SEND – to make mainstream schools more inclusive.

Measuring that isn't always easy.

The previous government shelved plans to include contextual information in league tables showing inclusivity of mainstream schools after "mixed feedback" suggested it would "risk generating perverse incentives".

Raw data on the number of pupils with education, health and care plans, for example, can be problematic. A low number could suggest that a school offers effective support without the need for education, health and care plans (EHCPs).

Considering the rates within the community can provide insight. However, Professor John Jerrim, at University College London, said establishing the areas to explore is "tricky".

"Catchment areas vary by school and change over time," he said. "You could use other geographic classifications but schools may be on the boundaries. So it's not a straightforward issue."

Researchers have tried capturing the wider context of schools in recent years.

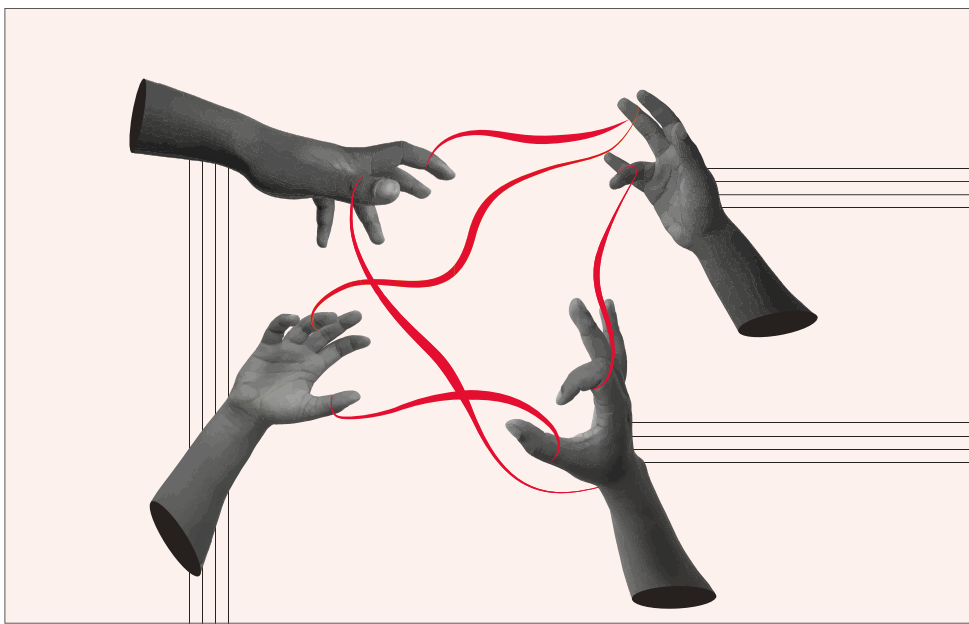
The Education Policy Institute's (EPI) inclusion tool allows users to compare school groups – councils and academy trusts – based on more than a dozen measures at primary and secondary level. It scores the likelihood of a local pupil who is disadvantaged or has SEND being admitted into the trusts' schools. In this context, they define a school's local area as where 90 per cent of its pupils live.

Other metrics offer context, such as teaching assistant turnover and whether the trust is operating a deficit.

The EPI found last year that



Professor John Jerrim



'In an ideal world, we would widen it to include other measures for which national data does not yet exist'

trusts with 10 or more schools had, on average, higher rates of persistent absence, suspension and unexplained exits than smaller multi-academy trusts (MATs) and councils. However, they admitted more disadvantaged pupils and achieved better outcomes for those youngsters.

Jon Andrews, the EPI's head of analysis, said the tool was something they "thought long and hard about," including consulting with the sector on what the measures should look like.

However, the data is several years out of date. Group data may also "mask" individual school practices across a group.

While Andrews thinks the tool is a "good blueprint" for DfE, there are "limitations of data" and it shows "just one part of the picture".

FFT Education Datalab created an online "school quality index" for secondary schools. Dave Thomson, its chief statistician, said because inclusion meant "different things to different people", its approach was to draw up a list of factors.

It created a hypothetical area around the school. So for example, if a school had 180 pupils in year 7, the area consisted of the nearest 180 state school

children of year 7 age. It looked at the percentage of disadvantaged pupils, pupils with a first language of English who recently arrived, pupils with EHCPs on roll compared to the area, and joiners and leavers, absence and suspensions. It considered "contextualised" attainment 8 scores for vulnerable pupils. Schools were given inclusion and attainment scores out of 100. It gave the school a ranking out of all eligible schools.

However, Thomson said it was "restricted" to measures available in public datasets or the national pupil database in 2023.

"In an ideal world, we would widen it to include other measures for which national data does not yet exist, for example measures of pupil wellbeing," he said.

Admissions data was a focus used by Comprehensive Future and the National Secular Society to analyse which secondaries have the biggest "inclusivity gap". Their study mapped secondary schools against surrounding primaries, weighting closer schools more heavily. They compared the school's disadvantaged pupil intake with the mix of surrounding primaries.

Where the school's intake was less representative of nearby primaries, they labelled this a "gap". They then explored the 200 "least

Continued on next page

INVESTIGATION: INCLUSION

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inclusive” schools to check their admissions policy. Thirty-eight per cent were faith schools – including nine grammar schools that have religious foundations.

In response, the Church of England said most of its schools had “no faith selection criteria”.

Paul Barber, Catholic Education Service director, said Catholic schools had 10 times the catchment area of other schools, so were less reflective of their immediate locality.

Councils begin their own work

Consultants working on the “change programme” – which is testing SEND reforms – found “bringing data together and using it across services is a sign of a well-developed local system”. To improve mainstream inclusivity, “more work is needed to agree on the most important measures”, according to an “insights guide” from the programme’s first phase. This should link to “long-term data on local needs” with “real-time operational data”.

The change programme tested a prototype inclusion dashboard, proposed by the previous government, with metrics on education, health and care. However, many councils felt the data they were already using locally was “more detailed, relevant and timely to support operational and commissioning decisions”.

Some areas were concerned a new national platform “might not keep with their own” dynamic data tools and dashboards.

In Islington, council officials created an “equity toolkit” for primary schools. It consists of three elements: metrics, survey results and a self-evaluation checklist.

The metrics include outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and “inclusion” measures, such as suspensions and exclusions for vulnerable children and leavers. It looks at community engagement, so the percentage of family responding to school surveys and attendance at SEND reviews.

Annual surveys of children, parents and staff are completed. There’s an “inclusion readiness checklist” for heads. Schools are benchmarked against each other and compare themselves with similar schools. It’s not mandatory for schools to take part – all have.

Candy Holder, education and achievement co-director, said the approach gives schools a way “to tell their inclusion story”. But she said it was not about “blame or finger pointing”: “We ought to be helping those schools who may be less further on with their [inclusion] journey.

School name:	Progress (direction of travel)	Regional comparison	National comparison
Disadvantaged outcomes			
School missed by FSM eligible pupils			
FSM eligible pupils missing 10%+ of school			
English and maths pass rate for FSM eligible pupils			
FSM eligible pupils in education or employment at age 16			
Parent/carer, staff and pupil opinion score			
Checklist score			
Disadvantaged inclusion			
Fair share of FSM eligible pupils			
Off-rolling practices for FSM eligible pupils			
Suspensions for FSM eligible pupils			
Permanent exclusions for FSM eligible pupils			
Parent/carer, staff and pupil opinion score			
Checklist score			
Area: Community engagement			
Parents evening attendance: FSM eligible pupils			
Survey completion rate: FSM eligible pupils and their parents/carers			
Parent/carer, staff and pupil opinion score			
Checklist score			

The Exeter ‘equity scorecard’

‘We ought to be helping those schools who may be less further on with their [inclusion] journey’

It’s about collaboration over competition.”

They will talk about whether the dashboard containing all the data should be made public – currently it’s available to just schools.

Islington’s approach is modelled on the “equity scorecard” by the University of Exeter and South-West Mobility Commission piloted by 20 secondary schools over the past year.

This scorecard focuses on disadvantage, including a regional and national comparison. It can be used by MATs or school groups to benchmark their performance.

Professor Lee Elliot Major said while the scorecard is internal facing: “What we were hoping...is they would be able to use it as an external facing document to say ‘look this is how we assess ourselves on equity or inclusion’. I suppose we were trying to counterbalance all the very strong accountability measures that are out there with something that’s a bit more empowering.”

The checklists rely on schools being honest about their provision.

“We are trusting them as professional people, but you can’t lie with the data element,” said Elliot Major.

Six schools in

Education South West trialled the scorecard.

“School leaders tend to have a moral imperative to be wanting to support all young people and to lift them up, and therefore playing games, what’s the point?” said director of education Suzannah Wharf said.

Leicester has worked with schools to create an annual audit of their whole school provision. Its ‘best endeavours and reasonable adjustments’ (BERA) framework helps schools know what they must do to meet the needs of pupils with SEND. Parents can use it to understand if reasonable adjustments should be in place and support them to challenge schools.

Schools then audit themselves on measures such as the leadership and management, inclusive teaching and SEND policies.

However, “It shouldn’t be about them getting ‘a grade’. It’s about having a really good understanding of inclusive practice, and the importance of working in partnership,” Jessica Nicholls, head of service in SEND support services said. The Department for Education did not provide any further detail on what it was considering this week.

But Jonny Uttley, visiting fellow at the Centre for Young Lives, said while available “inclusion” measurement tools are “imperfect”, they “attempt to do something that DfE hasn’t done in the last 15 years”.



Suzannah Wharf



Jonny Uttley

OPINION: INCLUSION

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How do we measure inclusion? Experts have their say...

Ofsted's new framework places a greater emphasis on inclusion. But the change has prompted an important debate about how inclusion can truly be measured. Ahead of The Difference's IncludEd conference in January, speakers reflect on how they witness inclusion being measured in schools.

KIRAN
GILL

CEO of The Difference

Through 'lost learning':
a window into who's struggling

Inclusion has historically been a 'fluffy' word in schools.

Compared to teaching and learning, it was often thought of as a poor cousin in terms of leadership progression and practice. No longer.

Over the past seven years, I've been lucky to work with practitioners and researchers across the country, who are getting hard data on elements of inclusion, and using that to drive up standards in schools and – most importantly – the numbers of children staying in class and succeeding in school.

This January, we're bringing those colleagues

together to share how to do rigorous inclusion work. We can think of this work tying together through what we at The Difference call the 'Lost Learning Continuum'.

The theory (and research) behind the continuum, is that we can measure whether we're getting better at inclusion by – literally – whether more or fewer children are included in lessons and the school day. Every piece of data we have on who isn't – who is instead 'losing learning' – is data which can shed light on priorities for school improvement.

Lost learning data is a window into children who most need inclusion. Ofsted's new approach to inclusion widens a definition from special educational needs to name young

people on pupil premium, those historically known to social services and those with protected characteristics.

Our lost learning research found these groups are out of the classroom in many ways, at really disproportionate rates.

But as much as grouping young people can help us, it can also hinder inclusion: we can end up creating systems to support the children whose needs we know about and miss those we don't.

And that's where the lost learning continuum is helpful, because it shows us, regardless of what category they're officially in, which children are struggling the most to stay in school.

JEREMY
DODDHead, The Avenue Centre
for Education, Luton

Through internal truancy

There was a time when, confronted with a question in class he didn't know the answer to, Freddie* would – without drama – get up and walk out.

Across the country, teachers have reported an increase in internal truancy since the pandemic. Teacher Tapp found 95 per cent of secondary schools are concerned about children coming into school but not into lessons.

Like APs across the country, we serve many pupils who have experienced significant personal adversity, followed by permanent exclusion or managed moves.

Our role is to help them re-engage with

education and believe they can succeed.

We used the Lost Learning continuum to look at earlier signs that students were still feeling disengaged. We found that Freddie wasn't an outlier. We set an ambition to reduce internal truancy by 50 per cent.

We started with better measurement: tracking internal truancy consistently via issued 'workslips' recorded in Arbor for anyone leaving the class as part of an emotional management strategy, and making sure there were lesson registers rather than just AM and PM registers.

This helped us diagnose challenges in the school day or week – like anxiety over the PSHE curriculum – and identify pupils we wanted to do voice exercises to unpick the

drivers of this 'self-exclusion'.

From there we developed strategies. We increased pupil accountability with daily 'catch-up' time after school for students who'd lost learning.

We re-worked our PSHE curriculum and, after hearing pupil voice anxieties about asking for help in front of peers, we developed universal staff training on assessment for learning, alongside improving the sharing of strategies effective for certain pupils, like Freddie.

There's still work ahead but attendance rose for us that year, and internal truancy fell by 52 per cent. And Freddie? He's stopped walking out of lessons.

Continued on next page

OPINION: INCLUSION

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
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Continued..

PROF NEIL HUMPHREY

Professor of psychology
Manchester University

CAZ BRASENEL

Executive principal at Ark
Kings Academy

Room removal can be an important tool to keep classrooms calm and everyone learning.

But if we don't track it, it's hard to understand its prevalence, impact (on learning for those removed) and whether what we do during room removal addresses the underlying challenge that led to removals in the first place.

Neil has been setting out to answer these first two questions, with colleagues from

Through room removal

the University of Manchester, who surveyed 34,000 pupils at 121 mainstream schools across Greater Manchester.

"When we looked at 'who is losing learning' we found similarities with children suspended or persistently absent: children with special needs and free school meals were more likely to report being in internal exclusion."

The dataset also showed internally excluded pupils "reported lower school belonging, weaker relationships with teachers, and (for

girls) poorer mental wellbeing than their closely matched, non-excluded peers".

Meanwhile, Caz has been tackling this third question with her team at Ark Kings: how do we address the root causes of room removal and reduce repeat incidents?

In tracking data, "we can target further intervention (like our two-week programme to understand barriers to lesson engagement, or in-school counselling) and when intervention successfully reduces repeated room removal".

JESS EASTON

Director of
The Engagement Platform

MIA COHEN

Executive assistant to the
CEO at The Difference

One day Oliver* was mugged outside his school. It was only one day, but after that he didn't go to school for six months. He just didn't feel safe anymore. Today we'd call him 'severely absent'.

This link between sense of safety and engagement in school can be seen clearly in the data. The Engagement Platform (TEP) has captured surveys of student engagement across 100,000 young people.

Through student engagement

Recent analysis showed one in three children felt unsafe (scoring their safety at a 5/10 or lower).

Safety is one component in Professor John Jerrim's conceptualisation of engagement, used in TEP, which includes belonging, enjoyment and relationships.

The data shows a dramatic fall in enjoyment, trust, safety and belonging when pupils move from year 6 to year 7.

ImpactEd's evaluation supports this – indicating low sense of safety, wellbeing and

belonging are associated with higher levels of absence and suspension.

Used formatively the data can be transformative. School leaders don't always know about those harms happening outside the school gates.

Engagement data is the canary in the coal mine, and once we can know which groups of young people are experiencing a drop in engagement (year 7 girls, for example) we can begin listening exercises to identify drivers in school and make adjustments.

JOHN PICKETT

Headteacher at Morpeth
School, with research from
Public First's
Dr Sally Burtonshaw

When our students were joining the dots with their own experiences and international events like the murders of George Floyd, Sarah Everard and Brianna Ghey, we might have been tempted to respond to rising disclosures of discrimination as pastoral issues.

They could have been dealt with in siloes by heads of year, repairing specific relationships between groups of students. Instead, we decided to lean into the uncomfortable

Through 'bullying' data

listening and deliver a more strategic response.

Ofsted's new approach to inclusion spells out that some children might have lower wellbeing linked to their protected characteristics, including experiences of racism.

We decided to take the same approach we take to improving our teaching and learning: start with data.

We surveyed pupils, interviewed them, and interrogated performance, behaviour, exclusion and absence data.

Key was improving our bullying data. We realised coding with the blanket term 'bullying'

was unhelpful. We began breaking down types of harm, including discriminatory harm that was misogynist, racist or homo/transphobic.

As we listened, young people disclosed more. Bullying data worsened, which was positive – fewer young people keeping discrimination to themselves, as we saw many children do in Ofsted's 2021 review into misogyny.

There's work ahead – this type of continuous improvement is constant – but we're pleased with the progress to date. And the bullying data is now falling, suggesting our work is having an impact on inclusion.

Movers & Shakers

Your fortnightly guide to who's new and who's leaving

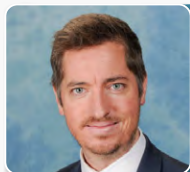


Dr Cat Scutt

Chief executive, Professional Teaching Institute
Start date: April 2026

Current role: Deputy CEO, Chartered College of Teaching

Interesting fact: A keen horse rider, she's ridden horses in at least 17 countries - her most memorable was Mongolia, sleeping in yurts. She has a menagerie of four rescue dogs and four horses.



Chris Taylor

Deputy director of primary, Lift Schools
Start date: January 1, 2026

Current Role: Regional education director (primary), Lift Schools

Interesting fact: Chris is a board-game enthusiast with over 100 games and loves bringing family and friends together for a night of strategy, laughter and friendly rivalry.



Dame Jane Roberts

Chair, Camden Learning
Start date: January 2026

Current role: Chair, Action for Stammering Children

Interesting fact: Interesting fact: She hiked over the Alps for her birthday this year - from Lausanne in Switzerland to Aosta in Italy. She once had her nose broken by a patient (she was in the wrong place at the wrong time) when she worked in medicine.



Helena Brothwell

Director of Education at Windsor Academy Trust
Start date: September 2025

Previous role: Interim education director for Ormiston Academies Trust.

Interesting fact: Helena is an avid Notts County FC supporter and so is used to the extreme highs and lows of supporting a league two team.

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INVESTIGATION: AI COMPLAINTS

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Huge rise in parent complaints driven by AI, headteachers warn

RUTH LUCAS

@RUTHLUCAS_

INVESTIGATES

Schools are experiencing an “exponential rise” in AI-generated parental complaints, experts have warned, with headteachers warning they “aren’t sleeping” due to the stress.

Parents made more than five-million formal complaints against schools last year, according to analysis by ParentKind. Teacher Tapp data suggests 61 per cent of heads have noticed the use of AI in complaints they’ve received.

Heads, trust leaders and lawyers told Schools Week about formal complaints over a school giving a child a cold lunch rather than hot, for following a family court order and even for covering a child’s verruca with tape in a PE lesson.

AI-generated complaints are often lengthy, cite multiple pieces of legislation, have “antagonised and inflamed language”, and demand “draconian consequences” for teachers involved in incidents.

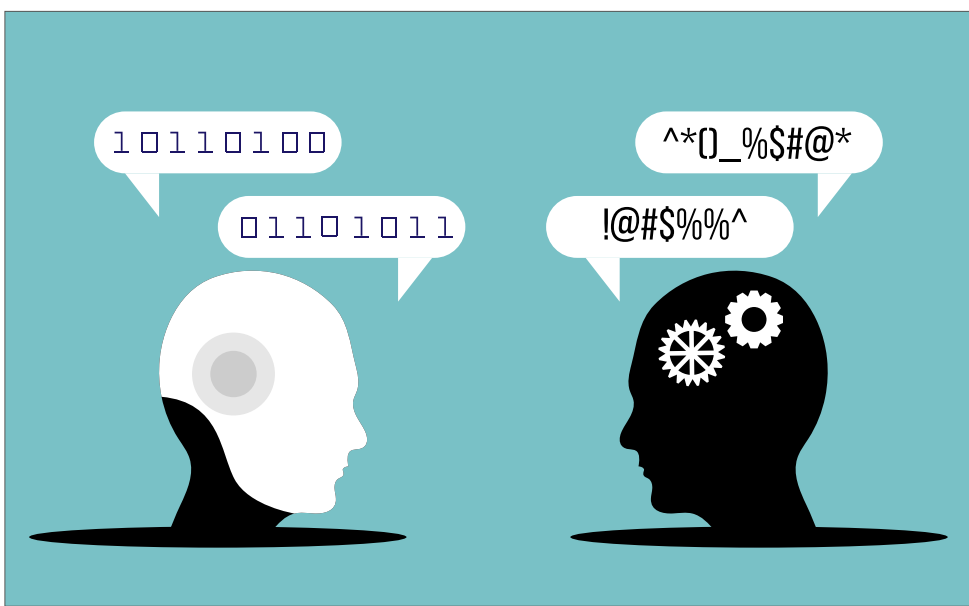
However, other heads have said using AI has been “enabling for parents” who otherwise would not have the voice or confidence to speak up. And legal experts warned the complaints are “symptomatic of a wider problem, signalling underlying relationship issues, breakdowns and communication failures”.

An ‘exponential rise’

School complaints processes first seek to resolve issues informally.

But when a formal complaint letter is sent, leaders must launch an investigation. Complaints can then be raised to a governors’ panel or the Department for Education if parents remain unsatisfied.

John Walker, partner and data protection officer at PHP law, said schools have



‘Parents quote case law from hundreds of years ago’

experienced an “exponential rise” in AI-generated complaints since January 2024.

Estimating that about one third of complaints he dealt with were written by AI, Walker said he had seen “masses” of threats of direct legal action against members of staff, or tribunals for disability discrimination.

“I haven’t seen a single case where the legal action that’s being threatened against people would be relevant,” Walker said.

Adam Jackson, senior associate at Winckworth Sherwood Law, said his firm had “seen parents quote case law from hundreds of years ago, or quote US legislation and very much missing the point, claiming rights where they absolutely have no rights”.

Jackson has dealt with complaints “as small as parents using AI to generate ridiculous arguments about the state of the school

menu, all the way up to these huge claims of negligence against the governing bodies that then go through the court”.

‘People aren’t sleeping’

At Lakenham Primary School in Norwich, a teacher covered a child’s verruca with gym tape before their gymnastics lesson.

The next morning, headteacher Cassandra Williams received a “harshly worded” four-page formal complaint from the child’s mother, which set out steps of “what they were going to do towards us because of us breaching human rights”.

Williams spent hours going through the complaint only to “find out there was nothing of real substance for a letter like that to ever be sent”.

At Bellevue Education Trust, CEO Mark

Continued on next page

INVESTIGATION: AI COMPLAINTS

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Greatrex received 13 complaints last year and four so far this year – the majority of which were generated with AI. His headteachers dealt with “significantly more”, Greatrex said.

Greatrex said his schools, spanning London and Berkshire, had received multiple complaints following court orders over separated families.

Daniel Cusani, deputy head of Simon Langton Grammar School for Boys in Kent, received a 58-page long AI-generated complaint about exams, which quoted “absolutely everything” with a “huge” level of detail.

“I want to know actually what the main source of the complaint is and what they want to get out of it – but that gets lost in a 60-page document”, he said.

For Chris Taylor, headteacher of Linden Primary School in Leicester, AI-generated complaints demanded the leadership take a clearer stance on the Israel-Gaza conflict.

“I think there’s been a genuine feeling – and AI has been used to articulate this – that the school, the city, should have done more to fundraise for Palestine...I think AI has been used as a particular vehicle to channel people’s emotions, understandably, about a world conflict.” But in some cases, he added, there was a “level of aggression and AI was used to channel that aggression towards me”.

Louise Clements McLeod, an NAHT union representative in Norfolk, said a headteacher in her area – who wanted to remain anonymous – had received a complaint about a teacher giving their child a cold packed lunch, rather than warm meal.

Clements McLeod said the complaint was asking “what was going to happen to the teacher, wanting really big draconian consequences for the member of staff”.

At her own school, Drake Primary, an AI-generated complaint involving one five-year old child hurting another was followed-up by the police.

“What will happen is a parent will email at six, seven, eight o’clock at night...people aren’t sleeping and they’re worrying about it.”



‘They’re symptomatic of a wider problem, signalling underlying relationship issues’

‘Parents are struggling massively’

Nearly all leaders who spoke to Schools Week said complaints generated with AI were not upheld.

Antonia Spinks, CEO of Pioneer Educational Trust, said although complaints received have “antagonised and inflamed language”, under the surface it shows that “parents themselves are struggling massively”.

Spinks, whose trust received six complaints in six months, said they often concerned SEND provision or cost-of-living struggles.

“What we find it that behind those things, there’s something that the family is grappling with that we’re unaware of. That’s probably why they’re feeling emotional.”

Greatrex said parents were choosing the formal complaints process “because it looks professional” over “actual genuine relationships and conversations”.

But Carolyn Ellis-Gage,

headteacher of Parkside School in Norwich, said using AI for complaints has been “quite enabling for our parents” and has “given them a way to voice” their concerns.

Her special school has about 53 per cent of children receiving pupil premium, while many parents have “particularly low literacy levels”.

She said: “For them, to be able to follow a complaints procedure and really clearly put out what their concerns are, is often really challenging...that doesn’t make their concerns any less appropriate or any less worthy.”

‘Symptomatic of a wider problem’

Claire Archibald, legal director at Browne Jacobson, said complaints are a “symptom in schools” and “not the disease itself”.

According to ParentKind, more a quarter of 2,000 parents polled thought there had been a breakdown of parent-school relationships.

“They’re symptomatic of a wider problem, signalling underlying relationship issues, breakdowns and communications failures,” Archibald said.



Antonia Spinks



Claire Archibald

NEWS

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Questions for Ofsted over Mossbourne behaviour review

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

Ofsted faces questions over whether it properly followed-up concerns about a leading academy's behaviour policies, after a safeguarding review found it used "isolating, shaming" practices on pupils.

The watchdog's "growing emphasis on behaviour" has "incentivised schools to adopt stricter policies", said Sir Alan Wood, who investigated "widespread concerns regarding the implementation of the behaviour policy" at the Mossbourne Victoria Park Academy, in Hackney.

Sector leaders described the probe's findings as a "wake-up call" for the government over the use of strict behaviour policies in schools. The government called the case "deeply concerning".

However, the Department for Education's behaviour ambassador has dismissed the review, accusing it of relying "on a methodology that would shame a fortune-teller".

'Isolating, shaming, humiliating'

Victoria Park is part of the Mossbourne Federation, the trust originally run by former Ofsted chief inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw. In 2024, Victoria Park ranked seventh in the country for its progress 8 score. It was rated 'outstanding' in all areas by Ofsted in 2023.

However, the review found the school's success had been "achieved at too high a cost for some pupils".

"Shouting" was used at Victoria Park "in a manner that humiliates and intimidates pupils".

Children were also placed on desks in corridors outside the rooms of senior teachers "as a punishment for minor infractions", a practice Wood described as "isolating, shaming, and educationally unproductive".

A former student "recounted having a panic attack while on a 'time-out desk'". Others "mentioned instances of self-harm and suicidal ideation directly related to the school's disciplinary regime".

Among other things, the school was told by Wood to "prohibit the use of any public reprimand, action, or sanction that has a primary function to draw negative attention to a pupil for the purpose of shaming them".

Liz Robinson, chief executive of the Big Education



Trust, said such policies come "from an obsessive focus on ... standardised test or exam outcomes", and "an explicit narrowing of what schools are for".

"What happened at Mossbourne is a logical, rational extension of the incentives in the system. It should be a wake-up call for politicians to look at this."

Ofsted 'weakness'

The report detailed how Ofsted found fixed-term exclusions at the school "were very high, particularly affecting pupils of black Caribbean heritage and disadvantaged pupils" in 2016.

Victoria Park's behaviour support unit – an internal facility that manages students who have been removed from lessons – was "used extensively", with some children "spending lengthy periods there with limited opportunities for reflection or learning support".

Wood said reports produced following the inspectorate's next visits in 2021 and 2023 – when it was rated 'outstanding' – "neither explicitly reference or assess whether the...concerns had been resolved".

Ofsted told the review it "would have raised issues about behaviour with the school's leadership". Despite this, Wood stressed "some of the issues" flagged "seem not to have been fully resolved".

Former senior inspector Frank Norris said this would undermine confidence in the watchdog, adding: "Most people would expect inspectors to evaluate the progress made since the previous inspection."

'Incentivised' by Ofsted

Wood said the review "has national implications". He noted a "perceived rise in classroom disruption, combined with political and media pressure for higher academic standards, has led many schools

to adopt strict behaviour policies".

Ofsted's "growing emphasis on behaviour in its inspection framework" has "incentivised schools to adopt stricter policies".

"The 'no excuses' model, when implemented rigidly without adequate safeguards, can become one of 'zero tolerance' that causes serious harm to vulnerable pupils," the report added. Ofsted told Schools Week it did not comment on individual school inspections.

Findings challenged

Tom Bennett – the previous government's behaviour tsar and current government's behaviour and attendance hubs ambassador – branded the review "staggeringly weak [and] biased", claiming it "relies on a methodology that would shame a fortune-teller".

Defending the school, he said it "gets fantastic results for its children" and "is, by many accounts, a brilliant place to be".

When asked about Bennett's criticisms, Wood said it was "obvious he's not read the report or its appendices. The bulk of the report talks about issues which are well evidenced."

Bennett's views also appear to differ to those of the DfE, which called the investigation's findings "serious and deeply concerning".

A department spokesperson said it "will continue to engage with the trust to ensure that it implements the changes needed".

Mossbourne did not respond to requests for comment. However, in a letter sent to parents, Victoria Park principal Matthew Toothe stressed the academy "has and is taking the review seriously".

He does not believe parents "will agree with...[its] conclusions" as if they did, they "would not entrust [their] children to our care on a daily basis".

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Ofsted should check SEND funding not plugging budget holes

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

School governing boards are urging Ofsted to ensure cash-strapped leaders are using SEND funding for children and not to fill other budgetary holes.

The National Governance Association (NGA) has today warned the SEND system is on a “trajectory toward complete breakdown” and “incremental change will not suffice”, after publishing a report on how to solve the crisis.

It is urging the government to bring special educational needs funding – which has been frozen for 12 years – in line with current costs and for education, health and care plans (EHCPs) to be reserved “for multi-agency cases”.

The organisation – which represents governors, trustees and governance professionals – has called for “national standards” for inclusive education to be drawn up to mend relations between schools and parents.

NGA chief executive Emma Balchin said: “The time for small adjustments has passed. Only whole-system change will deliver the support that young people with SEND need and have a right to expect.”

Restructure funding

Department for Education guidance says mainstream schools are expected to contribute up to the first £6,000 from their notional SEN allocation towards the costs of a child’s provision. Further funding can then be provided by councils if a child secures an EHCP.

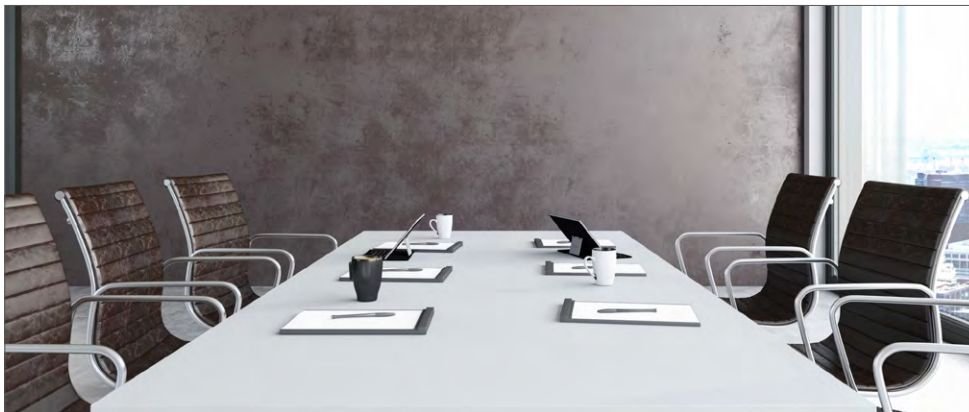
However, the £6,000 threshold has remained the same since 2014 and “eroded by over 30 per cent in real terms”, the NGA report said, forcing “boards to choose between supporting pupils with SEND and maintaining financial viability”.

The organisation is urging the government to “apply inflation-linked indices to the notional SEN budget” to protect its real-terms value. It also believes this would allow the threshold for top-up funding to be increased to “reflect current costs”. Doing this, NGA said, would allow councils to “focus their resources on pupils with the most complex needs”, promoting a “focus on earlier intervention”.

This would reduce “concerns about inconsistent or delayed provision caused by attempts



Emma Balchin



to navigate existing inefficient EHCP processes which privilege the more socially-economically advantaged”.

The group warned the changes “must...[be] part of a concerted effort to maximise inclusion in schools”. NGA said this should include Ofsted checking that “the notional SEN budget is being invested in SEN children, not diverted to fill other budgetary holes” as part of its inclusion drive.

Workforce training

NGA figures show just 42 per cent of boards believe their staff are equipped to support increasingly complex requirements. It is calling for “comprehensive SEND training” from “initial teacher training through early career frameworks to national professional qualification”, adding they should “be equipped to identify needs early and differentiate learning effectively”.

Parent complaints

The report pointed to NGA research showing the scale of the “breakdown” in relations between schools and parents. Eighty-two per cent of boards have witnessed an increase in complaints, with “SEND provision the primary concern”.

The body said boards must “champion a fundamental redefinition of how the system measures school success – shifting from narrow attainment data to indicators that genuinely reflect inclusive practice and support for children with additional needs”. This would “help to eliminate the perverse incentives” that lead to some schools not being inclusive.

To rebuild “collaboration” with parents, NGA recommended “professional development in relationship-building for school staff”. This would incorporate “parent engagement

training” and “equipping staff to handle difficult conversations and prevent escalation”.

It also called for new “national standards” co-designed with parents, pupils and providers “establishing universal expectations for inclusive education that move beyond individual legal battles toward cohort-wide accountability”. For schools, this would “provide clarity, and a level playing field, including certainty on the support [they] can expect from external providers”.

‘Keep EHCPs’

One in 20 children in England now have an education, health and care plan (EHCP), 11 per cent up since last year.

EHCPs attract extra funding and detail the support a child is legally entitled to, naming the school that must deliver it.

With councils “struggling to absorb” growing expenditure related to the plans, NGA argued for “cohort-based interventions for shared needs” to be implemented to reduce the “dependency” on EHCPs.

An example it gave was “the 1.5 million children with pandemic-related language delays”.

It also said that “rather than removing EHCPs or starting from scratch”, the plans should be reserved “for multi-agency cases requiring co-ordinated health, education and social care input or specialist placements”.

The report added: “Without urgent action, the SEND system will continue its trajectory toward complete breakdown, taking school budgets, workforce wellbeing, and most importantly, children’s futures with it.

“Incremental change will not suffice...the system requires fundamental transformation that addresses its interconnected failures simultaneously.”

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What's in a name? MPs probe transport issues

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

Home-to-school transport should be renamed as it causes an expectation of “door-to-door” services among parents, experts have told a parliamentary committee.

Witnesses gave evidence to the parliamentary public accounts committee, as councils' annual school transport costs have soared to £2.3 billion; the Department for Education estimates they could exceed £3 billion by 2029-30.

The suggestion comes after a NAO report found government does not have the data needed to understand who is using the transport and why costs are rising.

Here's what we learned...

1. The name is a 'huge problem'

Rose McArthur, chair of the home-to-school transport working group at Adept, told the committee the very name 'home-to-school transport' is “a huge problem” and causes “parental expectation”.

Local authorities have a duty to provide transport for children who attend their nearest suitable school but cannot reasonably walk there, or who have special educational needs or mobility issues.

But McArthur said transport provision “doesn't have to be...a door-to-door taxi service”. “It could be home to a bus stop, or a bus stop to here...a walking route to there.”

“I think there's a level of expectation that's just built in, and there's a level of over-provision that's been built into the system,” said McArthur. She added that councils “could definitely use commercial bus services better” and “need education and transport to be working together.”

Committee chair Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown added that Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers (ATCO) had warned that the nature “of the term 'home school' implies it is a door-to-door offer” and “more emphasis needs to be placed on travel assistance”.

2. DfE looking 'closely' at breakfast-clubs travel

There is no requirement for home-to-school transport to get children to school in time for free pre-school breakfast clubs.

Asked by MPs if this will be made a statutory



entitlement, DfE permanent secretary Susan Acland-Hood said: “Any change of policies has got to be for ministers, and we wouldn't want to...use this committee to pre-empt that.”

Juliet Chua, director general for schools group at the DfE, said as part of “a test and learn”, the DfE is “looking closely at the way in which home-school transport interacts with [breakfast clubs]”.

3. Lack of entitlement for older teens 'a problem'

While young people in England must remain in education or training until 18, there is no legal duty for local authorities to provide free transport for pupils over 16.

Anna Bird, chief executive of Contact, said its research showed 80 per cent of parents with children under 16 feel “their school transport is working”.

“Where it's not working well...is after the age of 16, where it becomes discretionary service. What we're hearing is that 70 per cent of families are expecting changes or experiencing changes.” She added this “has a huge impact on children's independence... [and] the whole family”.

Contact research shows 40 per cent of the families “had to give up work to...manage getting their children to school, where transport had been removed”, said Bird.

She gave an example of a 17-year-old with Down syndrome from Birmingham whose transport was cut when he turned 17. “Same school, same needs... [but] now he's paying £46 a day in a taxi fee to get to that school.” His single-parent family is “now having to shoulder a cost of about £5,000 a year.”

4. More joined-up thinking needed

Chua said the DfE wanted a “join-up between transport and education” to ensure transport “is included in planning for a child”.

“We do see instances where actually the transportation aspect is not taken into account,” she said. “What you see is very long journey times, which actually may not have a positive benefit to the outcomes to child. So we think there is a role for better joined up planning.”

5. Tribunals must consider costs

One MP suggested tribunals held over local authority decisions on SEND “don't take account of [transport] costs when they make the decisions.”

After a long pause, Acland-Hood agreed: “I think that's true.” She said legislation “does say it's important that value for money is taken into account”. But she added: “I think it would be fair to say that in the sort of emerging case law that... tribunals tend to be absolutely focused on the kind of parental preference as the first thing.”

6. Reforms will be 'responsible and thoughtful'

The National Audit Office has warned that upcoming SEND reforms must “address home-to-school transport pressures”.

Acland-Hood stressed she does not wish to “cause unnecessary concern”, adding reforms will be done “responsibly and thoughtfully with parents”.

She said a focus of the impending SEND reforms is “good-quality provision for more children closer to home”.

NEWS

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Four important things we learned from government data this week

RUTH LUCAS

@RUTHLUCAS_

Two thirds of children affected by child sexual exploitation were persistently absent from school last year, new government data shows.

Government departments often release multiple important sets of statistics on a Thursday at 9.30am, meaning critical information can sometimes be missed.

The Department for Education and Ministry of Justice released data this week covering rates of child sexual exploitation, SEND tribunals, student and staff exam malpractice, and local-authority (LA) maintained school expenditure.

Here are the important findings you might have missed...

1. Child sexual exploitation linked with absence

New DfE data shows there were 29,560 children assessed as affected by sexual abuse, while 12,120 children were assessed as affected by sexual exploitation, in 2023-24.

Two thirds (65.7 per cent) of children affected by sexual exploitation were persistently absent in the last year, while almost a fifth (19.42 per cent) had one or more suspensions in 2022-23.

Persistent absence is when pupils miss the equivalent of half-a-day a week of school.

And the data shows 44.1 per cent of children affected by sexual exploitation had special educational needs in 2023-24.

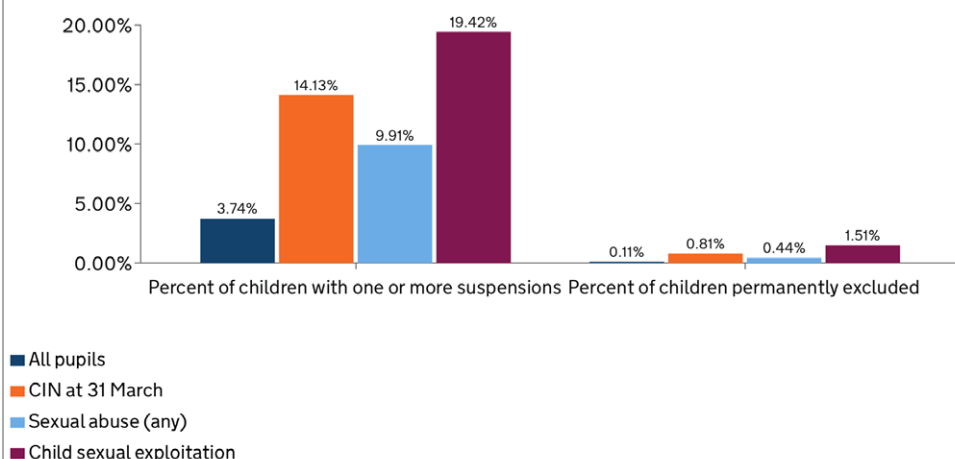
The proportion of children eligible for free school meals in 2023-24 was similar for those assessed as having been affected by sexual exploitation (61.9 per cent) or sexual abuse (60.7 per cent).

2. Exam malpractice on the rise

Data released by the exams regulator Ofsted shows there were 5,025 students penalised for exam malpractice in summer 2025. This is a minor decrease from 5,155 in the previous year.

There was also a large increase in staff members penalised for malpractice – from 245 last year to 465 this year. However, this makes up a very minor proportion of the 373,000 full-time teachers and support staff in state-funded

Percentage of children who had one or more suspensions, or were permanently excluded, by assessment factor, England, 2023



Source: Department for Education

secondary schools.

Most cases were deemed maladministration, meaning a teacher did not intend the action.

Of the 200 schools and college cases, which were lodged against whole settings, the majority were also maladministration cases. These represent 2.9 per cent of the overall 6,010 schools and colleges with results issued.

3. SEND tribunals rising

Figures showed an 18 per cent increase in SEND tribunals – which rule on EHCP appeals – in 2024-25 compared with the previous academic year.

There were 25,002 registered appeals last year, up from 3,147 10 years ago.

Data published by the Ministry of Justice shows that, as in previous years, the vast majority of cases – 99 per cent – that ended up at tribunal resulted in a finding in favour of parents. These are cases where the appellant wins most of the appeal.

Last year, 14,009 appeals were ruled on by judges. The original decision was only upheld in 143 cases.

The government said in its response to the education committee's SEND report that it recognised "the need for clear, independent routes of redress, retaining the SEND tribunal

as an important legal backstop for families who are unable to find resolution earlier in the process".

However, it added that "all parties should work closely and collaboratively to develop solutions to their disagreements, so that children or young people get the support they need quicker without the need for a tribunal appeal".

4. More council schools in deficit

DfE data suggests 17.8 per cent of council run schools are now in deficit – 2.5 percentage points higher than in 2023/24.

It comes after a Schools Week investigation found dozens of council-run schools have deficits of more than £1 million.

The total expenditure of LA-maintained schools was £26 billion, 0.5 per cent higher in cash terms than 2023-24, new figures show.

Local authorities spent a total of £35 billion on schools last year, which is 13.3 per cent higher in cash terms than the year before.

Schools Week analysis shows the number of maintained schools in deficit across 65 local authorities has leapt by 71 per cent, from just under 720 in 2021-22 to more than 1,200 last year. This is despite more and more maintained schools becoming academies.

Profile

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

Putting out the welcome MAT

When Andrew Truby took leadership of a Catholic trust, he was on his own and had no schools. He reveals how he built the 'home for orphans' and secured its future, during a career that has been characterised by seizing opportunities

When Andrew Truby answered a “mysterious” job advert and became the sole employee of a government-trialled Catholic turnaround trust, he was unsure what the future would hold.

But while another trust set up with the same purpose – taking on “schools no one wants”, or SNOWs – quickly closed, St Joseph Catholic Multi Academy Trust now has 10 academies and permanent status.

And Truby is using his platform to speak out about education policy, voicing concerns over Labour’s school improvement drive and calling for a MAT CEO pay scale after his own wages were highlighted by the government.

‘Wild’ stag dos

We meet in a café in Retford, Nottinghamshire. It’s a noisy place. Noughties music rings out, along with the scraping of plates and hissing of coffee machines.

Truby’s dressed in a blue suit. A badge, decorated with his trust’s colours, is pinned to his jacket lapel. Softly spoken and with grey hair, he tells me he’s 45, but jokes: “I look older, I’ve been through a lot.”

He was brought up in the Northumberland village of Seaton Sluice. Sundays were spent at church. His parents taught French in secondary schools.

In his teens, Truby spent weekends working at his aunt’s hotel in Whitley Bay. It was “wild”, with

stag and hen dos regularly descending.

“It was quite eye-opening,” he says. “I learned to deal with some really drunk people in difficult situations which could be dangerous, could get out of hand. You learn different skills in communication, de-escalation.”

Tutoring ‘solution’

While at university studying French and Spanish, Truby had his first taste of teaching. As tutors, he and a friend led language lessons in schools and colleges.

After completing his studies and securing a PGCE, he went solo, taking “the whole [business] on”. At its height, the firm employed 30 teachers

Profile: Andrew Truby

across the north of England.

"I saw an opportunity. It was the time when [the Labour government] had just brought in 10 per cent PPA time for teachers and schools were struggling with a solution to that. My solution was ...languages."

Truby says he was freeing up teachers to have their breaks, while also giving schools someone to lead language lessons.

In 2006, Truby moved with his wife, who is now the deputy head of a Catholic school, to Sheffield. He "applied for lots of different jobs", taking a role at St Marie's Catholic Primary.

Leadership fast-track

Truby was on a fast-track leadership programme at the time and, three years later, was appointed deputy head at another school in the city – St Thomas of Canterbury primary.

Before starting the role, he learned the head was due to retire. The school began recruitment with Truby keeping the seat warm. But he saw an opportunity.

"I proposed to the chair of governors at the time and to the diocese, 'You've only got one person in for [interviews] and if you wanted to interview me alongside, I'm offering myself to do that,'" Truby says.

"I knew they may have laughed me out of the door. When I think about it now, I think it's a crazy thing to do."

His gamble paid off and he was given the top job. Truby was 29, and believes he was one of the country's youngest heads. He soon realised "there were lots of things I didn't know. I was really idealistic".

Outcomes fall

The sector was abuzz with "excitement... [carried over] from the Blair administration", he recalls. There was "a lot of wacky stuff going on".

"I was in a creative partnership and there was a lot of money for random projects, [like] you could bring artists into school [and] we had sculptors. It was called a creative curriculum move – completely the opposite of a knowledge-based curriculum.

"But as a result of it, our results went down in 2011. I had to do some really hard thinking."

Truby remembers feeling he had "done all this stuff, got all these grants" but was still asking himself "what the heck is going on?"

He concluded the school "hadn't sorted out the



'You could bring artists into school, we had sculptors'

basics". He and his staff "tightened everything up", introducing behaviour expectations, "a clear lesson structure" and a "defined curriculum".

In 2014, it secured an 'outstanding' Ofsted. This "led to other things", Truby says, with the primary becoming a teaching school and he became a National Leader of Education (NLE).

The NLE programme saw leading headteachers – who had to meet specific eligibility criteria – support challenging schools. It has been replaced by Labour's flagship RISE school improvement drive.

Good money after bad

For this, 65 experienced turnaround school leaders have been seconded as advisers who are appointed to specific underperforming schools in their region to identify priorities and propose an outside organisation to deliver support over two years.

During his time as an NLE, Truby "occasionally" worked with "really exceptional" leaders who "developed" over the course of the programme. However, the "reverse" was more common.

"You've gone in there, leadership has been an issue to begin with, they've gone along with your plan – but when you're not going back, they've reverted to what they were doing before," he says.

"Unless you've got someone really driving [improvement] ... [these heads] will quickly fall

back into getting absorbed by the things that were distracting them before."

It's for this reason he fears RISE "could waste a lot of time, energy and resource", as well as "children's one opportunity in the classroom", if the leaders of the struggling schools aren't up to snuff.

"My concern with the programme is, do you just keep throwing good money after bad? [RISE advisers] should be able to at least make the case for a structural intervention to ensure they can go to the right place."

Mystery advert

In September 2021, Truby interviewed for a new job. He'd seen a "mysterious", "intriguing" advert for a role leading a not-yet-launched Catholic turnaround trust as part of a Department for Education pilot.

The trial – which also funded the formation of the Falcon Education Academies Trust – was started to find a temporary home for "orphan" schools. The idea was they would be "incubated" by the trusts, before moving to a permanent home.

He became CEO of the new Liverpool-based trust, that became St Joseph Catholic Multi Academy Trust, in January 2022. On his first day, Truby was its only employee.

"I had a bank statement, but I had nobody to sort it out and get money from the DfE. We were

Profile: Andrew Truby



building the plane as we were flying it.

"We had interim people, a lot of consultants. We literally couldn't appoint people quickly enough into the roles with notice periods and everything else."

Truby and the trust board agreed to have "a really decisive plan" for improvement as otherwise they were "going to fail". School improvement directors were also hired from Harris Federation and REAch2.

He modelled the trust – which received £1.25 million in government start-up funding – on the likes of Ark, Outwood Grange and Dixons, organisations that "were high performing but also had high levels of disadvantage".

"They've got a handle on curriculum, teacher development, behaviour systems. We wanted to ensure that we had the best possible fusion between what the highest-performing trusts do and how we have Christ at the centre."

Pay crackdown

Data for that period was used by government officials to name and shame 37 trust CEOs, including Truby, for high pay.

To calculate this, the Education and Skills Funding Agency initially grouped trusts by type and pupil numbers "to minimise bias".

CEOs were deemed to be "outliers" if they fell into the top 5 per cent in their band for having both the highest pay in absolute terms, but also as a proportion of their overall grant funding. No further action was taken against any of them.

But Truby says the workings that landed him on the list were "incorrect ...because the period that was covered was a partial year [for St Joseph]. I was the only employee and we didn't have schools, so it was completely skewed in that period."

Schools Week later revealed how the clampdown allowed the biggest chains to escape scrutiny as the method used to identify "outliers" appeared to



Truby with his son, Ben, on holiday in 2016

'They've reverted to what they were doing before'

be loaded against smaller trusts.

Truby says his current £150,000 to £160,000 pay packet is "in the typical range". But he believes the sector would benefit from a "trust leader national pay scale", akin to those already in place for headteachers.

"We're doing a role in education, in the public sector, and therefore we should have a range of pay, which would have a cap on it, [as] it would create more consistency. It could settle some of the debate."

'Relief' and mega MATs

Just a year after St Joseph was launched, it was announced its sister chain Falcon would shut, having only taken on four academies since 2019.

But Truby's MAT was given the green light to branch out and take on 'good' and 'outstanding' schools – easing its transition out of the government scheme.

The news was a "relief for the schools because [they] didn't want to leave" St Joseph. All of the academies that have been visited by Ofsted since joining the trust have received improved grades.

"In our case there was a need for a Catholic trust where we were. [There were Catholic] schools with directive academy orders and no trusts to sponsor them," Truby explains.

"In Falcon's case, there was no defined route. Is there a need for a turnaround trust where they're going to fix [schools] and then send them out?"

St Joseph now has 10 schools on its books, with the Archdiocese of Liverpool set to unveil a revised academisation strategy for the area in the new year.

A number of dioceses across the country are planning to launch mega MATs. The largest of these – consisting of 71 schools – is earmarked for Salford.

Truby stresses he doesn't know what will be included in the vision for Liverpool but says: "Mega MATs are definitely big enough to achieve economies of scale and as long as you can create the right hub infrastructure. I think it can be an effective model."

"You have a high level of protection, and you can weather the storm."

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Opinion

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CARA
CINNAMON
Chief impact officer, Mission 44

Pupils told us how school feels.
Now we must act on what they say

An official study of pupils’ perceptions of school life suggests many don’t feel safe or supported enough to learn. But solutions do exist, says Cara Cinnamon

The Department for Education’s newly published pupil experience data should stop all of us in our tracks.

The figures are stark. Almost a quarter of pupils (23 per cent) say they “never” feel safe or “only on some days”. In a class of 30, that’s around seven children who feel unsafe in the place they are meant to learn.

Enjoyment paints an equally troubling picture. Half of all secondary school pupils (50 per cent) say they “only sometimes” or “never” enjoy school, and parents aren’t always aware – they underestimate this figure by a factor of three.

Then there’s relationships. Nineteen per cent of pupils say they “never” or “rarely” have someone at school who believes in them.

For children on free school meals or in need, it’s even higher. That’s just under one million secondary-aged children (19 per cent) going through their school day believing that nobody thinks they can succeed.

Children need to feel safe to learn. And not just physically safe, but

psychologically safe. They need an environment where they can feel safe to ask questions, try new things and make mistakes – all foundational parts of the learning journey.

They also need adults who believe in them.

Before they arrive at school, some young people may have overcome enormous hurdles just to get dressed and get themselves through the door. Encouragement from a teacher who believes in them and sees their potential can be life changing.

So what do we do with this data?

- 1. Reframe youth voice**
Measuring how children feel about school is not a “nice to have”. Creating mechanisms for young people to tell us how they feel about school is an essential way of ensuring the system we’re building is responsive to their needs.
- And those voices must be representative, not just the loudest or most confident. When young people feel listened to at school, they feel valued, they develop stronger relationships with staff – this can all lead to increased engagement in their learning.
- 2. Flip the blame narrative**
Too often, when things don’t work, we default to child-focused interventions – implicitly or



“ Too often we ask ‘what’s wrong with this child?’

explicitly asking “what’s wrong with this child?”

But the child isn’t broken, the system around them is. Labelling pupils as “disengaged” or “hard to reach” assumes they choose not to engage, rather than asking whether schools are meeting their needs.

That thinking is, at best, prejudicial and at worst, discriminatory – and means we intervene far too late, once harm has already been done.

3. Invest in educators
Nobody enters teaching to run an exam factory that makes children unhappy.

Countless teachers and school leaders work tirelessly to do the best for their students. Often, they’re working against the grain, without credit from an accountability system that cannot see the entirety of their efforts.

The lucky ones find strong leaders who build an inclusive workplace that helps them grow in their careers. And this in turn delivers excellent results for children.

4. Build the case for inclusion
Focusing on wellbeing doesn’t have to come at the expense of attainment.

It has always struck me as strange that we understand the importance of wellbeing in the workplace and its impact on adults doing their best work, but wellness in children – who are still learning to read and write, regulate emotions, communicate and build confidence – is often overlooked.

Schools that centre pupil experience are not lowering standards; they are creating the conditions for real learning. We need to find ways to empower those schools, scale those models, and let them know we’re here to support them.

Mission 44 campaigned for more pupil experience data and we are pleased that it’s been published. The next step, however, is even more important: the government must be brave enough to act on it and change what isn’t working.

Opinion

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DOMINIC WYSE

Professor of early childhood and primary education, UCL Institute of Education

Children are struggling with reading. A different approach is needed

Rather than intensifying 'rigorous and systematic' phonics programmes, schools should be confident in finding new ways to address pupils' motivation in tackling this essential skill

Most people with an interest in education agree helping children learn to read and write is one of the most important goals of education.

While most children learn these essential skills well in England, there are too many who don't meet the necessary standards and who struggle with reading. Not only is this a distressing experience for these children but it limits their chances to succeed in their education.

The outcomes of statutory tests of reading in England show that despite more than a decade of increasing pressure to adopt narrow models of synthetic phonics, nearly 25 per cent of children each year are not meeting the expected standards for reading when they finish primary school.

About 4,500 children each year are at the bottom of the assessment distribution, with a worrying proportion not even achieving a score at all.

England's 2014 national curriculum states that if children have not learned to decode words

when they start year 3, then the synthetic phonics approach should be intensified: "As in key stage 1, however, pupils who are still struggling to decode need to be taught to do this urgently through a rigorous and systematic phonics programme so that they catch up rapidly with their peers."

The problem with this approach is that if children have had between 190 hours and 380 hours of discrete synthetic phonics during their first two years of the national curriculum, but they still can't decode, then perhaps a different approach should be tried.

Our new research shows an evidence-based new way forward for helping children with reading difficulties.

Step one is for schools to have the confidence to change their approach if it is not working.

It has become clear from research that explicitly addressing children's motivation for reading as part of teaching them is vital. One way to do this is through the selection of the best books written for children; real books that will engage children in powerful storytelling, non-fiction writing and poetry.

Educators must assess children's motivation, including finding out about their interests. Another component that has been shown to work is teaching writing to help reading (and vice-versa).



“Step one is for schools to have the confidence to change their approach if it is not working”

Reading comprehension is another vital component. Instead of leaving this until after phonics teaching, it should always be integrated as part of effective teaching of phonics and reading.

Our research shows teaching about the alphabetic code is still done in a structured way, but it is contextualised through an emphasis on the real purposes for reading and writing.

The importance of integrating components such as reading comprehension applies to the teaching of all aspects of reading. For example, the word 'guessing' seems to have taken on a negative connotation through a link with reading 'cues'. When children are rightly encouraged to use their knowledge of how phonemes are represented by letters to decode words, the next step requires them to guess.

The sounding-out of the word requires children to guess what that word might be – and might mean – based on their knowledge of words in their oral vocabulary. It requires them to check if that

word makes sense in the context of the sentence they are reading. This kind of guessing, or hypothesising, is an essential part of reading, because reading is the process of understanding the meaning of texts.

The final point we addressed in our research paper is whether teachers in England are already using multi-component approaches to helping children with reading difficulties. We surveyed 133 experienced teachers including special needs teachers and co-ordinators.

Some teachers said that they would move away from synthetic phonics if they were not working. However, about 20 per cent of the respondents said they would continue with them even if they were not working, consistent with the national curriculum policy quoted earlier in this article.

England's recent national curriculum review did not recommend any changes to policies on teaching reading. Our research shows that there are things that should be changed based on the most up-to-date research evidence.

Opinion

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DR NIKOS SAVVAS

Chief executive of Eastern Education Group

Teachers need support to defend diversity from far-right's attacks

Ministers must do more to protect the teaching of British values in schools, or staff and pupils risk being cowed by hate, warns Dr Nikos Savvas

In September, the Metropolitan Police estimated that up to 150,000 people visited London for the 'Unite the Kingdom' rally led by far-right activist Tommy Robinson.

As someone who has given more than a quarter of a century of service to this country in school environments, I am deeply concerned by these growing threats.

Since then, we have witnessed a number of attempts to sow fear and division in our communities, particularly the targeting of migrants and minority groups, and I feel compelled to speak out.

There has been a menacing silence surrounding the flags and this extremist rhetoric directly threatens the fundamental British values we, as educators, are legally required to promote in our education system.

In my role as chief executive of an education group, responsible for more than 15,000 students, I find myself caught between my duty to foster open dialogue and critical thinking, and the growing pressure from extremist voices seeking to silence diverse perspectives.

Tragically, some of my teachers, across subjects such as law, philosophy and politics, have reported rebuke for simply teaching

their subject, because it reflects the diversity of our history and society.

One helpful response has come from the Association of Colleges, which launched an equity, diversity and inclusion charter and is coordinating sector-wide guidance to support staff and students, while maintaining safe, inclusive learning spaces.

But to be truly effective, these efforts require strong government support. My message to our government is that our nation's greatness has always rested on enduring principles that transcend political divides.

Our schools, colleges and universities must therefore remain places where this diversity of thought and experience can flourish.

We are anchor institutions, shaping the citizens of tomorrow, and it is our duty to ensure that students feel safe to learn and grow in environments rooted in fairness, compassion, inclusion, freedom and hope.

To achieve this, the government firstly needs to strengthen protections for educators and extend protections for freedom of expression and balanced debate in schools and colleges, as already exists in higher education.

Next, it must counter extremist messaging by developing coordinated government communication that celebrates Britain's multicultural heritage and explicitly challenges xenophobic



“ It is vital the government safeguards institutional independence

narratives.

Finally, it is vital it safeguards institutional independence and issues clear guidance affirming that schools and colleges have both the right and responsibility to present evidence-based perspectives on immigration, diversity and British history without fear.

School staff also need to unite and stand firm so that we protect our shared educational environments where future leaders are shaped.

When we create these spaces our students and wider community accomplish incredible things.

Earlier this year for example, one of our students, originally from Zimbabwe, founded Better Youth UK to give teenagers with limited opportunities the chance to make money legally and steer them away from crime, drugs and gang violence.

I am also proud to say that BBC Radio Suffolk DJ and broadcaster Angelle Joseph recently praised our One Sixth Form College students' celebration of cultural diversity, saying it gives young people the chance to "celebrate who they are and where they are from".

The voices of our students matter. When we trust them

with responsibility and create environments where they can engage with diverse perspectives, they repay that trust many times over.

What we gain are the true citizens of tomorrow, young people who are able to challenge extremism, evaluate misinformation, and contribute meaningfully to our democracy.

This is particularly crucial in sixth form, where we are the educational stewards of young people about to cast their first votes in democratic elections.

If we cannot provide them with the critical thinking skills and diverse perspectives necessary to engage meaningfully with democracy, we risk failing not just our students, but our entire democratic system.

Those who spread lies and seek division often choose to ignore this and instead declare our great country as "broken". To "fix" a country, surely we must come together, build bridges, and inspire positive change in our communities.

As the prime minister has affirmed, we will not surrender our flag. Nor will we surrender our future to those who thrive on fear and division.

Solutions

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DR HELEN
CARE
Clinical Psychologist

Beyond the scroll: 5 ways to support students with social media

The most helpful thing for young people is authenticity in our responses and genuine curiosity about the challenges

The Online Safety Act (OSA), which came into effect in July this year, made headlines.

Rightly so. Many of us, as parents/carers, healthcare professionals and educators, are concerned about what our young people might be exposed to online and have become frightened of social media, focusing on its dangers. However, young people are telling a different story.

The OSA was designed to limit access to the most harmful content, such as self-harm and pornography. Young people don't disagree with this aim, but they do get frustrated with many of the narratives that focus solely on the negative aspects and ignore the things they find helpful about the online world. Students tell me their biggest sources of stress are not tied to social media, but instead to their futures: the environment, job security, world conflict.

This is reflected elsewhere: the annual Pearson School Report, for example, found that while 57 per cent of teachers cite social media as the top pressure on students, only 16 per cent of secondary students say it worries them.

A quarter name "uncertainty about my future" as their biggest concern, 31 per cent are worried about getting a job, and 26 per cent point to school expectations and academic performance as their main pressures.

The gap between student and teacher perceptions of stressors is important. A lack of awareness causes frustration and miscommunication on both sides, making young people less likely to seek support and adults feel less confident giving it.

For most young people I speak to, social media can be a useful way of feeling connected to friends. The pressures of social media for them come from the day-to-day interactions with 'normal' content: the pressure to keep up streaks and message friends daily; the pressure to spend real money to restore streaks if they're lost; managing other people's responses to their posts.

In my experience, the most helpful thing for young people is authenticity in our responses and genuine curiosity about the challenges they face. Here are some tips for how to take this approach:

1. Help them feel safe to air concerns. Don't assume what they are worried about – ask. When



“ Students tell me their biggest sources of stress are not tied to social media

discussing social media, start with open questions that don't presume it's always bad. Some possible opening questions:

“How do you find social media? What's good or bad about it? What issues have you come across?”

“If you could go back in time and talk to your younger self, what advice would you give about using social media?”

“I have a young child at home. Do you think I should let them use social media?”

2. Empower yourself with the knowledge about practical steps that can help. For example, how to turn off comments or block messages. Get students to identify solutions that have worked for them – perhaps creating a top-tips list (which could be shared or put on a poster).

3. As with any difficult topic, tread carefully. It often helps to ask for questions to be submitted anonymously and in advance.

Choose which you will answer beforehand, or you can guarantee you're going to pull out the most inappropriate question that's only there to get a laugh.

4. Be prepared for concerns to be raised and take them seriously. We cannot stress the harms of social media and then risk students feeling like their concerns are dismissed as 'petty' squabbles on a group chat. Provide safe ways for students to ask for and receive support. An example that's worked well in some schools is a box for discreet requests for help.

5. Take a whole-school approach. We all know the pressure teachers can be under to fill all the gaps. Safety and safeguarding are part of a wider culture (and responsibility), and it's important that teachers also feel supported and know who they can report concerns to if issues are raised. Ultimately, the best way to support young people is simple: listen to them, trust them and meet them where they are.

Week in

Westminster

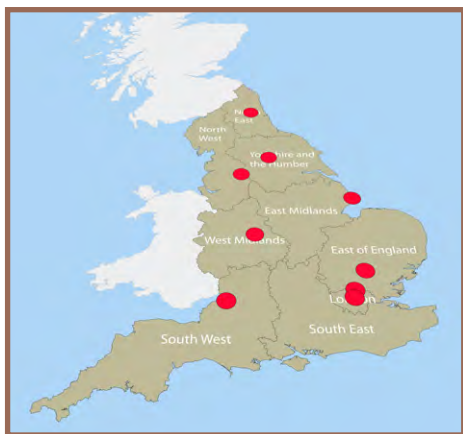
The week that was in the corridors of power

TUESDAY

Tickets for ministers' SEND "conversations" sold out quicker than a Taylor Swift/Oasis (pick your fight) concert last month, much to the disappointment of parents.

In a bid to reassure the education committee that they were listening, Bridget Phillipson said they will run events "in every corner of England and online".

Hmm. That seems to be based on a rather liberal interpretation of the word 'corner', considering anyone in Cumbria would have to travel hundreds of miles to nab a seat, with Manchester, Darlington and Leeds their closest events.



And thoughts are with anyone on the south-west coast – it looks like a long and expensive train ride to Bristol, Reading or London to take part.

Phillipson said by working "collaboratively with stakeholders, we can ensure the reforms are not only well-informed but also widely supported".

We can only wish them all the best with garnering that support, given headlines earlier this year about education, health and care plans potentially facing the chop.

WEDNESDAY

Labour's ever-shifting pledge to recruit 6,500 new teachers came under fire in the House of Commons again – this time at prime minister's questions.

Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch demanded the prime minister tell her "how many extra teachers are there" since Bridget Phillipson became education secretary.

"More than when the Conservatives left office and I am very proud to say so," Sir Keir Starmer quipped.

"We are on an upward trajectory. They left our health service on its knees. They left our schools in a mess. They left our economy absolutely broken. They should be utterly ashamed of their record in service."

But Badenoch shot back: "Wrong! There are now 400 fewer teachers since the education secretary came into office. She is shaking her head but it is on the Department for Education website. Does she not check it once in a while?"

So, who is wrong?

According to Jack Worth, the National Foundation for Educational Research's school workforce expert, it is "correct to say the overall number of full-time equivalent teachers has fallen by around 400 in the year from November 2023 to November 2024.

"However, the government has chosen to frame its 6,500-teacher pledge around teachers in secondary schools, special schools, alternative provision (AP) and further education (FE), but not primary schools.

"On that basis, the same...data shows an increase of 2,300 teachers in secondary and special and AP."

Primary school pupil numbers are in freefall...

So both sides are kind of right, right? Well it would certainly be easier to work out if Labour wasn't constantly moving the goalposts.

We should all know by now how much of a scandal the SEND crisis is and it has been going on for far too long.

This hit home again this week when Liberal Democrat MP Chris Coghlan was on the edge of tears, telling the chancellor about the "avoidable suicide" of his 17-year-old constituent who was autistic.

He urged Rachel Reeves to fund the Department for Education and children's mental health services to end the crisis.

Reeves pledged reform that enables children to live fulfilling lives, paying tribute to the teenager.

However, she said it was one for Phillipson to lead on, which we understand but must assume the Treasury has some look in, considering the huge bill potentially coming its way.

Private Eye reported that posts on children minister Josh MacAlister's Facebook page about adoption had been "hidden".

He has a Facebook use disclaimer on his own website, which said repetitive comments or bad-faith engagement will be removed. Also that there should be "no misinformation or unverified claims". Interesting saga.

All rise for Lord Russell Hobby, one of the lucky 34 granted peerages this week.

We think he must be the first sitting academy trust chief executive to also get a seat in the Lords? Please send letters to the editor if we are wrong...



Headteacher, Iveshead School, Leicestershire

L24 - L29



Are you an inspirational leader who has the creativity, courage and commitment to enable staff and students to achieve and who has a track record of leading change and improvement?

We are delighted to be appointing an experienced aspirational leader to join our trust secondary leadership team as Headteacher of Iveshead School at this exciting time for Mowbray Education Trust.

Our vision is to deliver first-class teaching and learning with integrity. Meaning that everyone attending our schools, regardless of background or ability, receives a first-class education. Our common values of inclusivity, aspiration and collaboration underpin all that we do.

The Headteacher of Iveshead will play a crucial role in supporting the development of our secondary phase, working collaboratively across the secondary leadership team within the culture of the Trust and sharing accountability for the performance and success of the secondary schools.

Contact us:
futuretalent@mowbrayeducation.org



For more information,
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Principal Opportunity Saint John Fisher Catholic Primary School



Lead with Faith, Vision & Purpose

Saint John Fisher Catholic Primary School in Coventry is seeking a faith-driven leader to take up the role of Principal from Summer term or September 2026. Rooted in Gospel values and part of the Romero Catholic Multi-Academy Company, this vibrant, inclusive school serves children aged 3–11 and is committed to nurturing every child academically, spiritually, and socially.

This is a rare opportunity to shape the future of a thriving Catholic school with a strong foundation and a clear mission: *“Through Christ we live, love and learn, in our caring community.”* The successful candidate will be a practising Catholic with a deep commitment to Catholic education, bringing proven leadership experience, strategic vision, and a passion for inclusion and excellence.

You will lead with compassion and clarity, embracing a trauma-informed approach where every child is respected and loved. Your role will involve strengthening the school's ethos, driving high standards in teaching and learning, and fostering strong relationships with parents, parish, and the wider community.

In return, you'll join a faith-filled, supportive environment with dedicated staff/governors, engaged pupils, and a collaborative leadership network. You will benefit from centralised MAC services, a strong School Improvement Team, and opportunities for personal and professional growth.

If you are ready to lead with heart, purpose, and impact — and help shape lives through Catholic education — we invite you to apply.

Salary: £78,702 – £91,158

Closing Date: Friday 9th January 2026 at 9am

Interview Date: w/c 19th January 2026 (TBC)

Start Date: Summer term or September 2026





SENIOR CO-CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Scholars' Education Trust

**Salary range: £167,800 to
£181,000 (5 point scale)**

Required for September 2026



Scholars' Education Trust (SET) is seeking an exceptional leader to join our Executive Team as Senior Co-Chief Executive Officer, guiding our diverse family of schools into the next stage of growth and excellence. This is a rare and exciting opportunity to shape the future of a successful and expanding multi-academy trust.

SET is a cross-phase trust of thirteen schools across Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and West Essex, educating nearly 10,000 pupils from nursery through to sixth form.

Our vision is clear: to work collaboratively so that every young person in our care achieves more than they ever believed possible. Our values: Achievement, Care and Excellence (ACE), underpin everything we do.

We are looking for a strategic and inspirational leader who shares our commitment to improving standards and outcomes for all pupils. The successful candidate will have a proven track record of leadership at scale, with the ability to drive educational excellence, foster innovation, and build strong relationships with stakeholders.

They will bring the vision and resilience to lead a complex organisation, ensuring sustainability and growth while maintaining the highest standards of governance and accountability.

As Senior Co-CEO, you will:

- Provide strategic leadership across the Trust, working in partnership with Trustees, Headteachers and civic partners.
- Champion educational excellence and inclusion, ensuring every child receives a high-quality education.
- Lead the School Improvement Team and act as the Trust's Accounting Officer, upholding probity and compliance.
- Shape and deliver a people strategy that attracts, develops and retains outstanding staff.
- Represent SET nationally and locally, influencing policy and promoting our civic mission.

The job description and responsibilities of the current Senior Co-CEO of SET will form the basis of the role. We are, however, willing to be flexible and would be open to a discussion with the successful candidate about the exact scope of the jobs, its responsibilities, and its hours.

You will be supported by a highly experienced Executive Team and a committed Board of Trustees, as well as a collaborative network of schools that share best practice and innovation.

If you are a visionary leader with the ambition to make a lasting impact on thousands of young lives, we would love to hear from you.

For more information about the Trust and the role, please see the Senior Co-CEO Information Pack, including job description and person specification.

Applications

Please download the SET application form from our website: : Current Vacancies - Scholars Education Trust
Applications should be sent to Geoffrey Payne, Chair of the Board of Trustees, via Hazel Wale at h.wale@scholarseducationtrust.co.uk.

A conversation with our Chair and/or a visit to our schools can be arranged – please contact Hazel Wale on the above email or call 01727 734420.

Closing date: Friday, 09 January 2026 at 9am

Interview date: WC 02 February 2026