

# SCHOOLS WEEK

A digital newspaper determined to get past the bluster and explain the facts.

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P12

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FRIDAY, NOV 24, 2023 | EDITION 340

'Project-based learning must be back on the curriculum'



P24

Breaking the 30-year silence on boys' attainment gap



P25

Meet the leader taking the law into her trust's own hands



P20-22

## PARTING SHOT: IT'S NOT ME, IT'S YOU

- Tells critics inspectorate is 'poorly understood'
- Blames funding cuts for 'curtailed' positive role
- Perry death 'used as pivot to discredit' Ofsted



# SCHOOLS WEEK

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# Spielman swipes don't show Ofsted in good light

Chief inspector Amanda Spielman has increasingly become more forthright in her response to criticism over Ofsted, and the impact it has on the sector.

The inspectorate's annual report was published on Thursday – earlier than usual, presumably done given that the inquest of headteacher Ruth Perry starts next week.

It will mark a turbulent year for the watchdog, one which saw criticism splashed across national media for weeks. This may be reignited by any revelations next week.

Many supported and continue to support Ofsted's focus on curriculum over results under Spielman. But leaders have legitimate concerns about inspection, and its consequences.

Spielman's comments this week reflect what many say she has confided in private: that Ofsted should take no blame.

This is a view that she has increasingly made public, resulting in this week's claims that, actually, the issue is that everyone just "misunderstands" Ofsted.

The comments about bad actors "pivoting" on the death of Perry to "discredit" the inspectorate may have a grain of truth, but

actually the majority of leaders have long raised concerns. Given Perry's inquest starts next week, it also comes across as pretty insensitive.

The inspectorate does an important job, a job that must be maintained in some form. It will never be loved.

But the resistance to listening to any criticism of Ofsted's role in the system, as leaders say this week (page 4), is tone deaf.

It might not matter much to the sector: changes seem to be on their way. The incoming chief inspector Sir Martyn Oliver has signalled a more "compassionate" approach to inspection.

Meanwhile, easing the cliff edge of one-word judgments looks assured if Labour does go on to win the next election – although that in itself will be tricky to get right.

Spielman has done a lot of good in her extended seven-year tenure. She firmly believes in the important role of an inspectorate, and that it must be fiercely independent. But it must also listen.

It would be a shame if Spielman's legacy was overshadowed by her walking away with her fingers firmly planted in her ears.

## Most read online this week:

- 1 **Educational psychologists on strike: 'It's all crumbling'**
- 2 **Mothers are key to stabilising the teacher workforce**
- 3 **Working in schools 'unsustainably demanding' as teacher wellbeing hits five-year low**
- 4 **DfE rejected special school for county slammed over place shortage**
- 5 **Safeguarding grade fears 'out of proportion', says Ofsted director**

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# Spielman's 'insensitive' parting shot upsets Perry's family

AMY WALKER

@AMYRWALKER

Claims by the Ofsted chief inspector that critics used the death of headteacher Ruth Perry "as a pivot to try and discredit" its work have been described as "grossly insensitive" by the headteacher's sister.

In an unapologetic parting shot to detractors, Amanda Spielman – who leaves the watchdog next month – also claimed that its role was "poorly understood" and budget cuts had "curtailed" its work to "build goodwill".

School leaders said the comments were "tone deaf and crass".

Speaking to BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour yesterday, Spielman said there was "no question that there's a great deal of activity in the sector to create anxiety".

Her comment followed a new survey by the leaders' union NAHT, which found 85 per cent of members who responded were "unconfident" in the inspectorate.

"There was a very sad case in the spring that has been used as a pivot to try and discredit what we do," Spielman added, later clarifying that the comment was related to Perry.

The Reading headteacher's family believe the 53-year-old took her own life in January before the publication of an Ofsted report rating her school as 'inadequate'.

An inquest will begin on Tuesday.

Her sister, Julia Waters, said Spielman's comment was "not only grossly insensitive to my family's



Amanda Spielman

grief but shows a shocking lack of understanding of the concerns of the teaching profession".

The "outpouring of anger and anguish" following Perry's death was "not a 'debate about accountability'. It is the alarm call of a profession in crisis."

Perry's death led to huge pressure on the government, which introduced changes to the inspection framework earlier this year.

Caroline Derbyshire, the chief executive of the Saffron Academy Trust, said there have been calls for years to end "toxic" inspections that were driving leaders out of the profession.

"[At the time] it felt quite a brave thing to say," Derbyshire said, adding that after Perry's death, more had "felt the bravery to be able to speak [out]".

"I don't think there's anyone whipping this up, I think it's baked into the system."

Spielman's comments came as Ofsted published its annual report weeks earlier than usual.

In a foreword, the chief inspector said the watchdog was "poorly understood", with many people not recognising that "as a matter of

government policy, Ofsted's schools work has long been limited to the diagnostic function of inspection".

She said "much" of the discontent among schools "links to how school inspection judgments are used in the government's regulatory system".

It was "not a policy-making department and cannot decide to divert its resources to support work, any more than the driving test agency can decide to switch to giving driving lessons.

"Yet it is being argued that Ofsted is acting punitively or in bad faith by not doing so. Clarification is needed."

Ofsted's budget was "about a quarter of what it was 20 years ago", which meant "many strands" of its work "that help build school sector goodwill and reinforce our value to the sector" were "having to be progressively curtailed".

"But despite all this, Ofsted continues to perform its role fairly, professionally, thoroughly and constructively."

Jonny Uttley, the chief executive of The Education Alliance multi-academy trust, said the characterisation was "tone deaf and crass... The inspection system, which is no longer fit for purpose, contributes significantly to this."

Spielman said "compromising the regulatory system could undermine progress". But she added her "parting hope" is that government "will recognise and find ways to address the pressures and imbalances described in this letter in its future policy and funding decisions".

It emerged this week Spielman was on the shortlist to become the next chair of the BBC.

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

## AP sometimes used as 'shadow SEND system'

Ofsted has pledged to boost the scrutiny of the "misuse of alternative provision", after warning that a shortage of special school places left it "sometimes used as a shadow SEND system".

The watchdog warned in its annual report that some schools used AP as a "last resort", with many using it "for crisis management rather than as a suitable long-term placement for a child".

Inspection outcomes were worse for state-funded AP than for other state schools, with 83 per cent judged 'good' or 'outstanding' last year, compared with 88 per cent of all schools.

There was also a "lack of understanding and clarity" on how AP was commissioned, Ofsted

said. It planned to "increase scrutiny of the misuse of AP", but did not give any details of how it would do so.

The number of AP placements increased by 13 per cent from 59,900 in January 2022 to 67,600 this year.

Ofsted said the proportion of young children was also rising, with 21 per cent of AP pupils aged under 11 – 15 per cent up on last year.

Ofsted said the growing number of pupils with SEND had put "added pressure" on such schools, with pupils "referred to AP while they wait for a suitable placement at a specialist school".

"As a result, some pupils are spending long periods of time in provision that is not

resourced to meet their needs.."

Some schools used part-time timetables for children waiting for a special school place, often "for those with behavioural needs", which was not always in their "best interests".

A *Schools Week* investigation in October revealed how the places crisis has resulted in thousands more children educated in unregistered provision, where teachers require neither qualifications or criminal checks.

The annual report also warned that five of 16 local areas inspected under the new area SEND inspections framework received the lowest rating of "widespread and/or systemic failings".

# Doing better: Spielman's final annual report

## SCHOOLS WEEK REPORTER

@SCHOOLSWEEK

Ofsted has heralded a “sustainable improvements in education” in the final annual report of Amanda Spielman's tenure as chief inspector.

Here's what we learned.

### 1. More schools 'good' or better, but fewer 'outstanding' ...

Ofsted inspected 7,240 state schools in the year to August 31, up from 4,670 in 2021-22 and the highest number in five years.

Ninety per cent of 'good' schools remained at that grade or improved, and 75 per cent of schools that were previously 'requires improvement' were rated 'good' or 'outstanding'.

Ninety-seven per cent of previously 'inadequate' schools improved.

Nationally, 89 per cent of schools are now judged 'good' or 'outstanding'.

However, the proportion of 'outstanding' schools decreased from 18 to 16 per cent last year, while the proportion rated 'good' increased from 70 to 73 per cent.

### 2. ...more 'outstanding' schools keep grade

A number of 'outstanding' schools were downgraded when an exemption on reinspection was lifted. But they were less likely to lose their top grade last year than the year before.

In 2022-23, 16 per cent of primary schools and 31 per cent of secondaries kept their 'outstanding' grade, up from 14 and 24 per cent respectively in 2021-22.

Schools that had gone the longest without an inspection were prioritised.

“I think that first year of inspections probably came as a bit of a wake-up call that made a lot of people really take a look,” said Spielman.

So far, 760 previously exempt schools have lost their 'outstanding' grade, while 160 schools have been upgraded to the top rating.

### 3. Fewer schools eligible for intervention

The number of schools eligible for intervention because of their performance has fallen, despite a change that brings schools rated 'requires improvement' twice in a row into scope.

Since last September, such “coasting” schools have also been at risk of academisation or



Amanda Spielman

rebrokering to a new sponsor.

But the number of schools eligible for intervention has actually gone down – from 1,610 in 2021-22 to 1,340 in 2022-23.

### 4. Schools' 'deeper' curriculum thinking helped catch-up ...

The outgoing chief said she had seen “sustainable improvements in education” in her time in office.

She claimed that a “deeper thinking about curriculum undoubtedly helped when the pandemic hit”.

“My view was that for most children, most catch-up would happen in their normal classrooms, with their normal teachers – and that seems to have been the case.”

### 5. ...and they are 'rising to the behaviour challenge'

The report said that although schools reported deteriorating pupil behaviour since the pandemic, inspection judgements for behaviour and attitudes showed a largely positive picture.

Of 3,720 schools given a graded inspection this year, 73 per cent were judged good and 17 per cent outstanding on behaviour and attitudes.

This showed that many “are rising to the challenges they are facing”. But the picture was “very different” between primaries and secondaries.

Ninety-three per cent of primary schools were judged good or outstanding for behaviour and attitudes compared with 76 per cent of secondary schools.

### 6. Short inspections 'restrict professional dialogue'

Ofsted has been reviewing its current framework introduced in 2019. The review found it was being implemented “largely as intended, and that the framework is flexible across a range of provision types”.

“But we have identified some areas where implementation is challenging.

“For example, although we have sufficient time to come to valid judgements, inspectors recognise that in ungraded school inspections in particular, the limited time they have can restrict the professional dialogue with leaders and others more than is desirable.”

The main fundings will be published “shortly” and an impact evaluation will be conducted next year.

### 7. Improving picture for ITT

A new framework for inspecting initial teacher education was introduced in 2021.

In the year to August 31, Ofsted inspected 110 providers. Around nine in 10 were 'good' or 'outstanding', up from around six in 10 of those inspected in the year before.

Overall, 96 per cent of providers are now judged 'good' or 'outstanding', up from 94 per cent a year ago, but down from 100 per cent before the new framework was introduced.

By August 2024, all registered ITT providers will have been inspected under the current framework.

# Thousands more kids leaving school without GCSE grades 'new norm'

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOOTH

EXCLUSIVE

The proportion of pupils leaving school without a GCSE grade in English has nearly doubled since before the pandemic, prompting concerns about the “new normal” of teenagers left behind.

Analysis by SchoolDash reveals that 3.3 per cent of pupils received no grade in English in 2023, compared with 1.7 per cent in 2019.

There is a similar, though less extreme, picture in maths, rising from 2.5 per cent pre-pandemic to 3.3 this year.

It follows a two-year plan by regulator Ofqual to return to “normal” after teacher grades were awarded during the Covid years.

But Timo Hannay, the founder of SchoolDash, said it was not “quite true” that GCSE grades returned to normal this year.

“These are relatively small proportions of the total cohort, but still represent thousands of children.”

SchoolDash’s data included looking at the number of pupils not entered into an exam, those who were entered but did not complete the test, and those who sat the test but were awarded a U.

The proportion of pupils with a “U” in English was 1.4 per cent this year, up from 0.9 per cent in 2019. Likewise, no entries rose from 0.3 per cent to 0.7 per cent and those getting no result rose to 1.1 per cent from 0.5 per cent.

Duncan Baldwin, the professional community leader for the Confederation of School Trusts, said it was tempting to think that things had returned to normal because pass rates based on entries were largely in line with 2019.

“Schools’ experiences with their students last year tell a different story, resulting in higher proportions of pupils without grades in English and maths.

“It’s the students without entries that is the issue, some of whom struggled with attendance and mental health, and risks being missed in top-level messaging.”

Some schools fare worse than others. The proportion of pupils with no English grade in ‘inadequate’ schools rose from 3.9 per cent in 2019, to 6.7 per cent. This is



compared to 2022 – a 14.9 per cent rise. It’s hard to tell if Progress 8 measures have been impacted by the rise in no grades.

The DfE introduced a mechanism to adjust the scores of pupils with very low Attainment 8 scores – deemed “outliers” – to stop any disproportionate impact on a school’s overall Progress 8.

This could include youngsters absent because of health issues, a bereavement or taking prolonged absence for something such as pregnancy.

Baldwin said leaders knew how much work, care and resource pupils who fell into this category took, and how often the problems associated with them were beyond what schools could address.

Hannay added that the increase in pupils with no grades could impact on the way schools were assessed, “potentially penalising them for post-pandemic trends, such as absence and illness, that are beyond their control”.

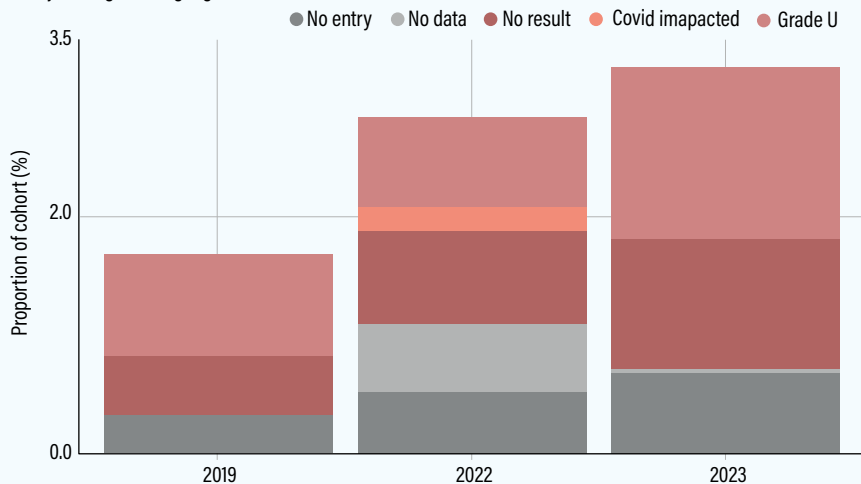
There was a slight increase in pupils having their score “capped” in 2023, up to 0.97 per cent from 0.95 per cent in 2019.

Dr Jo Saxton, the chief regulator of Ofqual, previously said this year’s results “hold up a mirror”, adding: “Some of the things that they show are uncomfortable – absolutely – but it’s a picture that needs to be seen.”

The Department for Education has been approached for comment.

## Proportions of pupils not obtaining a GCSE grade

Subject: English Language



Sources: Department for Education; SchoolDash Insights; SchoolDash analysis



Timo Hannay

## NEWS: BUDGET

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# £13m pilot aims to boost primary provision for neurodiverse pupils

FREDDIE WHITTAKER & SAMANTHA BOOTH  
@SCHOOLSWEEK

One in ten mainstream primaries will take part in a new £13 million pilot to upskill school staff in a bid to improve provision for neurodiverse children.

A “partnerships for inclusion of neurodiversity in schools” pilot was successful in the third round of the government’s shared outcomes fund, which aims to tackle “some of the most difficult social, environmental and economic challenges”.

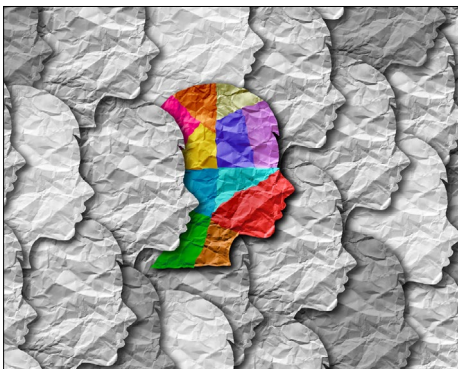
By bringing together health and education staff, the new scheme will “create environments that better meet neurodiverse children’s needs, ensuring they are able to thrive as part of their wider cohort”. Neurodivergence encompasses variations in neurological function, including autism and ADHD.

The scheme fits the government’s push for early intervention in the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system.

Forty-two integrated care boards, which decide local health plans, will each work with about 40 primary schools, reaching about 450,000 children.

A school will receive five days additional specialist support from occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, mental health practitioners, educational psychologists, specialist nurses or specialist teachers.

This would help to upskill staff and boost



teacher confidence to “offer excellent provision” for neurodiverse children in mainstream schools.

The DfE said the project would work with schools to “move away from an emphasis on individual interventions and instead work towards approaches to teaching and learning that work for the whole cohort”.

A school would have access to a dedicated funding pot, helping it work with local parent-carer forums or parent-carer groups to support “stronger relationships and strengthen co-production across the school”.

Cash allocations have not been confirmed, but the fund equates to just under £8,000 for each school.

The pilot will start in September. While it is a one-off, the scheme will be evaluated and any learnings used to inform future policy, the DfE said.

Stephen Kingdom, the campaign manager for

the Disabled Children’s Partnership, welcomed the pilot, saying schools could be a “hostile environment” for autistic and neurodiverse children.

But the partnership was concerned whether there was the workforce capacity to make the programme a success. There were already shortages of educational psychologists.

Margaret Mulholland, the SEND and inclusion specialist at the Association of School and College Leaders, also called for a “much bigger commitment from the government in improved funding for SEND provision and ensuring that all schools are able to draw on the range of specialist support that is required”.

It is not the first education programme to win money from the fund. In 2021, £15.6 million was awarded to the “Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforces” scheme.

It aimed to provide intensive multi-agency support to vulnerable young people in AP who were “most at risk of disengaging with education, being criminally exploited by gangs and becoming involved in county lines and knife crime”.

The shared outcomes fund aims to test “innovative ways of working across the public sector” by “incentivising departments to work collaboratively across challenging policy areas, testing innovative approaches to strengthen joint working, improve outcomes and deliver better value for citizens”.

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

## DfE’s unprotected budget faces real-term cuts

While planned uplifts to school budgets next year will go ahead, unprotected parts of the Department for Education’s budget face real-terms cuts over the coming years if spending is not increased.

Analysis of the autumn statement by The Office for Budget Responsibility, the government’s spending watchdog, shows that plans to only increase day-to-day departmental spending by 0.9 per cent a year means spending across government will be £19.1 billion lower in real terms in 2027-28 than today.

School budgets for the next two years are

protected because of a pledge made by Rishi Sunak while chancellor to bring school funding back to 2010 levels in real-terms by 2024.

Decisions beyond that will be taken at the next spending review, due after the next election.

The government was criticised this week for failing to provide extra revenue and funding for schools at a time when leaders are calling for more support. The autumn statement contained no cash to address the RAAC crumbly concrete crisis, for example.

“Far from being prioritised...education has apparently been sidelined in this

announcement,” said Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the NAHT, while ASCL’s Geoff Barton said schools were “literally falling apart”.

Jeremy Hunt did announce increased funding to help tackle antisemitism in education with £7 million to the Holocaust Educational Trust over three years.

School staff will benefit from his announcement of a cut in national insurance contributions, but the freezing of tax thresholds mean some will lose out as pay rises push them into a different earnings threshold.

# Reduced funding threatens 'invaluable' AP pilot

AMY WALKER

@AMYRWALKER

EXCLUSIVE

Schools taking part in an "invaluable" government scheme to stop vulnerable pupils in alternative provision (AP) "entering a life of crime" say reduced funding is squeezing their support.

AP specialist taskforces, launched by the DfE in November 2021, provide pupils at participating schools with support from mental health professionals, family workers and speech and language therapists.

The aim of the £15 million two-year pilot across 22 schools was to support young people most at risk of "serious violence or gang exploitation", and help them to move into further education, employment or training.

The DfE promised to extend funding for the pilot until March 2025, a commitment laid out in its SEND and AP improvement plan earlier this year.

The plan said the scheme was "demonstrating the value of...offering timely and accessible support" and not-yet-published evidence from the pilot should encourage "local areas to consider [it] as an effective model" for their AP inclusion plans.

In August, the DfE announced the extension would be backed by an extra £7 million. But it has since confirmed to *Schools Week* that only 75 per cent of the costs have been covered by government funding.

The other quarter has to "be met via local match funding", including through local authorities and trust reserves, "as part of the move to a sustainable model going forward".

Gerry Robinson, executive headteacher of Haringey Learning Partnership in north London, said the scheme had been "absolutely invaluable".

But the funding reduction had put "huge pressure" on the pupil referral unit, which



has had to foot half the salary of a social worker as part of the taskforce. This year's art therapy sessions had to be cut as a result.

"You can't offer the same support. Because money is having to be redirected to provide the match funding for the taskforce, other parts of the provision will suffer," he said.

Astrid Schon, head at London East AP, said the funding change had added "a significant amount of pressure on to our school budget".

But she was "really concerned" that if funding ran dry after March 2025, it might not be able to retain specialists such as a gangs' coordinator who provided on-site mediation and support for pupils at risk of exploitation.

"It's making a massive difference to being able to assess the kids and support them."

Phil Willot, director of education at the Raleigh Education Trust, which runs a taskforce in Nottingham, said it would "cause concern" if no funding was available beyond the pilot.

But he added that the responsibility should not lie solely with the DfE.



Gerry Robinson

"It's really important that policymakers from other aspects of society, like healthcare, are made aware of the impact it's having," he said.

The DfE said the pilot was being "fully evaluated" by independent evaluators in partnership with the Youth Endowment Fund.

But Willot said that between January 2022 and July 2023, there had been a 30 per cent drop in mental health referrals from Raleigh to external agencies. A third of pupils also "improved their attendance".



# Exclusion rates rise to pre-pandemic levels

## SCHOOLS WEEK REPORTER

@SCHOOLSWEEK

School exclusion rates are back to pre-pandemic levels, figures suggest, with the number of suspensions soaring again from last year's record-breaking numbers.

The Department for Education on Thursday published exclusion and suspension statistics for the 2022-23 autumn term.

Full-year statistics are published later in the year. But the data shows continued rises compared with the same term before Covid.

There were 3,100 permanent exclusions in the autumn term – a rate of 0.04, which is equivalent to four per 10,000 pupils and the same as the pre-pandemic 2019-20 autumn term.

Eighty-six per cent of permanent exclusions were in secondary schools, which had an exclusion rate of 0.07 – slightly below the pre-pandemic 0.08.

Exclusions are way up from the autumn term in 2021-22 – they fell heavily during Covid and have been slowly increasing since.

A Schools Week investigation in September found excluded children in a third of areas were stuck on waiting lists for specialist provision as exclusions rose faster than councils could keep up with.

Full data for last year from a snapshot of 22 councils that responded to our freedom of information request showed exclusions were 50 per cent higher than in 2018-19.



The DfE will not publish the full-year figures for last year until July next year.

Persistent disruptive behaviour was listed as the main reason (49 per cent) followed by physical assault against a pupil (23 per cent).

There were 247,400 suspensions in the autumn term (a rate of 2.96), up from the 178,400 (2.17) in pre-pandemic 2019.

Suspensions are typically higher in the autumn term than in spring and summer, but this amounts to a 39 per cent increase.

Suspensions had been increasing gradually before the pandemic.

The rate in the autumn term last year for secondary schools was 5.9 – which equates to one in 17 pupils – compared with 4.19 in the autumn term of 2019-20. But the rate in primary

schools over the same period has fallen.

Last year's full suspension figures showed the highest rate since at least 2006.

Almost half of suspensions were for one day or less. As with exclusions, persistent disruptive behaviour was the most common reason (55 per cent), followed by verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult (20 per cent).

The highest suspension and permanent exclusions rates are in the north east (4.65 and 0.06 respectively).

The lowest suspension rate was in outer London (1.47) and the lowest permanent exclusion rate was in inner London (0.01).

The suspension rate for free school meal pupils was more than four times that of their peers.

[READ THE FULL DFE STATISTICS HERE](#)

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

## Times-table results improve for year 4 pupils

The proportion of year 4 children scoring full marks in the government's times-tables checks has risen by two percentage points, shows the DfE's second set of multiplication tests.

The tests were introduced two years ago.

Figures show 29 per cent of youngsters answered every question correctly, as full marks remained the most common score achieved. Twenty-seven per cent got full marks last year.

Damian Hinds, the schools minister, said the results showed the government's reforms were driving up standards.

"These checks show more children are learning their times-tables in primary schools

alongside our phonics screening check that has seen an increase in results since last year."

Overall attainment rose among all eligible pupils over the past 12 months, with average scores increasing from 19.8 to 20.2 out of 25.

The scores among pupils with an education, health and care plan (EHCP) also increased slightly to 14.7, from 14.5. But the gap between EHCP children and everyone else grew marginally.

Marks among disadvantaged children stood at 18.3, compared with 20.9 for their better-off peers.

Boys continued to score higher (20.4) than girls (19.9). But the difference in achievement widened slightly from 0.4 marks to 0.5.

The DfE said pupils should not take the test if they were unable to answer the easiest questions or were working below year 2 level.

In all, 96.2 per cent of all year 4 children took the test, up from 2021-22 (95.9 per cent).

However, the percentage who could not do year 2-level maths remained the same (3 per cent).

London remained the highest-performing region with scores increasing from 20.9 to 21.1.

The south west continued to register the lowest scores, although marks rose from 19.1 to 19.7.

When broken down by school type, free schools were still top (21.2).

[READ THE FULL DFE STATISTICS HERE](#)

## Advertorial

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# Teachers strike over 'unacceptable' pupil behaviour

## SCHOOLS WEEK REPORTER

@SCHOOLSWEEK

A troubled Kent school closed on Wednesday after teachers went on strike over "unacceptable" pupil behaviour, including threats of sexual violence against female staff, gang fights and youngsters throwing chairs and tables.

Members of the National Education Union at Oasis Academy Isle of Sheppey want leaders to commit to "zero tolerance", with "fixed exclusion tariffs" of 10 days for any pupil who assaults, or threatens to assault, staff.

Pupils were forced to learn at home after the split-site school had to close.

Oasis Community Learning announced earlier this year it would give up control of the school after a damning 'inadequate' Ofsted report found more than half of pupils did not attend regularly.

After a visit last June, inspectors said: "Too many pupils feel unsafe at this school. Some told us that they 'have had enough' of being jostled and hurt in corridors or verbally abused."

The school will be split into two new schools that will move to the Leigh Academies Trust and EKC Schools Trust in September next year.

An Ofsted report following a monitoring visit in July said: "While expectations are not yet implemented fully across the school, staff are dealing with unacceptable behaviour and using sanctions appropriately more often."

It added staff "feel that the school is heading in the right direction".

### Four assaults in two weeks

But the union told *Schools Week* there had been four physical assaults in the past two weeks alone. Recent incidents include:

- Threats of sexual violence against female staff, threats of being "cut", "sliced" or "killed"
- Pushing and hitting staff, gang fights, large groups of children attacking one pupil



- Pupils throwing tables and chairs at staff and down corridors
- Racial bullying of staff
- Destruction of school property, including kicking down doors and smashing windows

Nick Childs, the NEU's senior regional officer, said the strike action was "regrettable" but "unavoidable".

"The Oasis Trust has been aware of staff safety concerns for many months and the union has been clear about the decisive action required to address the unacceptable working and learning environment.

"Whilst some progress has been made in negotiations in recent days this is too little, too late for our members."

### A scenario no one wants...

The strike was called after negotiations over staff and pupil safety broke down.

The union said other areas of dispute, including workload and a promised bonus payment, had been "largely addressed".

Five more strike days are planned.

The Ofsted monitoring visit pointed out that 26 staff members were due to leave at the end of the summer term, although most of those positions had been filled.

A spokesperson for Oasis said providing a "high-quality education for every pupil is always our top priority. During this industrial action we will be offering online study materials to minimise the disruption.

"Whilst this is a scenario that nobody wants, we have had positive discussions with the union, and we are confident that we have made significant progress."

The government's first national behaviour survey, published in June, found on average six minutes for every half hour in class were eaten up by poor behaviour – about 50 minutes a day.

But Teacher Tapp data last month showed just over a third of teachers said their most recent lesson was disrupted due to poor behaviour, down from a high of 41 per cent in December 2019.

However, most teachers (71 per cent) report that pupil behaviour has deteriorated since they started teaching, up 36 percentage points since 2018.

The NEU passed a motion at its 2021 teacher conference calling for a "moratorium on exclusions in the wake of the pandemic".

However, the union's then leaders said exclusions "must still be available" to keep victims of sexual abuse, violence and bullying safe.

# Village primary wins the 'golden ticket' for new school

**JACK DYSON**

@JACKYDYS

A village primary that admits 13 pupils a year has been handed the keys to a new school big enough for more than 400 children after winning "the golden ticket".

North Northamptonshire Council had wanted a free school to move into the multi-million-pound building in Wellingborough as recently as January.

But the government pulled the plug on the scheme after projections showed local primary places, already hit by tumbling birth rates, would be squeezed further by a new school.

Faced with potentially having to mothball the new-build – completed two months ago – councillors voted to hand it over to Wilby Primary School, which has 87 children on its books.

However, Tom Richmond of the EDSK think tank, believes Wilby's "good fortune" raised questions about how many other free school projects were at risk of collapse as birth rates continued to fall.

"So long as the Department for Education tightly grips the free schools programme at a national level, we will no doubt see more examples of significant mismatches between what local areas need and what the DfE has decided to build."

The building – funded through developer contributions – is on Glenvale Park, an estate in Wellingborough with proposals for 3,000 homes. Plans for the sweeping complex were approved 13 years ago, before North Northamptonshire Council was formed in 2021.

Local authority documents said a review in January found "there would be insufficient demand" to support the primary "opening until September 2025 at the earliest".

Latest Office for National Statistics figures show the number of babies delivered across North Northamptonshire fell by 10 per cent between 2016 and 2021.

The council papers added that the launch of a new academy at Glenvale Park would create an "over-provision" of primary



Primary school at Glenvale Park housing development

places that could force an existing school to close "in a worst-case scenario".

The DfE told the local authority it "would not fund a school where the need for additional places is not supported".

Jonathan Simons, the head of education consultancy firm Public First, said the decision highlighted "a failure of strategic planning by the council (or its predecessor)". It highlighted the need for better advance planning around new housing developments and free school bids.

Scott Edwards, North Northamptonshire's children, families, education and skills lead, said the agreements were in place with the estate housebuilder "well before" the authority was formed.

"The problem when you're doing section 106 agreements [developer contributions] and building huge new housing estates is they're done years and years in advance. It's very difficult to pre-judge numbers."

Wilby will move into Glenvale Park – three miles from its present site – in September.

Lynette Dudley, Wiley's chair of governors, said the primary hoped to admit 30 reception children next academic year. There would be "a natural increase" when



Wilby Primary School

families moved into the estate.

A petition set up by parents said the move threatened "to dismantle the soul of our community". But Dudley said the school's current home "doesn't have the space for additional resources", with children having to use a "tiny hall" for PE and lunches.

"It's 175-years-old and over the past three or four years repairs have become a nightmare. We've got damp, leaking windows and the boiler's really old...it's a very old school on a very small site.

"[The move] will mean we can spend money on resources for the classroom. It's the golden ticket."

It would also "strengthen" the school's ability to improve after it was recently rated 'requires improvement', down from 'good'.



# New trust descriptors could stifle innovation

**JACK DYSON**

@JACKYDYS

The boss of a prominent academy chain fears the government's new trust quality descriptors could become the "Ofsted handbook" of the MAT world.

Tom Campbell, the chief executive of E-ACT, said the sector could "miss a lot of innovation and diversity" if leaders stuck rigidly to the Department for Education's definition of trust strength.

The guidance surfaced in last year's schools white paper, with ministers basing it around five "pillars" to help potential expansions.

Their definitions were fleshed out in April, with MATs told they would be expected to support flexible working, operate collaboratively and "take action to promote equality and diversity".

Officials use the descriptors for commissioning decisions related to academies.

But speaking at the Schools and Academies Show on Wednesday, Campbell said the descriptors "don't sit easy with me because surely it's up to a trust to define itself".

"Some trusts run all schools the same...other trusts, like E-ACT, think of schools as their own school and make decisions that relate to their context.

"It's quite difficult to find a catch-all set of descriptors...I welcome some clarity, but I'm nervous about it becoming the Ofsted handbook of MATs."

Campbell reasoned that his 28-school chain had "evolved" and changed the way it defined itself since its launch 16 years ago.

He was concerned "a lot of innovation and diversity" would be missed if too much time was spent "trying to build our trusts to these descriptions". They should be used as a "conversation starter" instead.

Rowena Hackwood, the chief executive of the Astrea Academy Trust, said she had used the guidance as a loose framework when talking to regional directors.

But they should not be used to judge the "performance" of an MAT.

The five pillars are: high-quality



and inclusive leadership; school improvement; workforce; finance and operations; governance and leadership.

When the DfE published more details seven months ago, it said the guidance "represents a clear and ambitious vision for the academies sector". It also hoped it would help to "inform trusts' improvement and capacity-building priorities".

Anita Notta, the chief executive of the Khalsa Academies Trust, said the descriptors helped her two-school chain after it was issued with a financial notice to improve.

This culminated in the notice – imposed before Notta started running the trust – being lifted in May.

"We had a visit from a regional director who said '18 months ago we wouldn't consider you, however now, we are actively having conversations with local authorities to say is this a trust you would consider [for expansions]'"

Responding to Campbell's concerns, David Withey, the chief executive of the Education and Skills Funding Agency, insisted the indicators were not "a binary

checklist" but a "really helpful" guide, particularly for smaller trusts.

"What we've tried to do ... is play back to the sector the sorts of things we are looking at. They are really helpful as a bit of a guide for people, particularly in smaller trusts.

"The organisation has found it really helpful because they allowed them to have clearer conversations with trusts about the sorts of things we're thinking about."

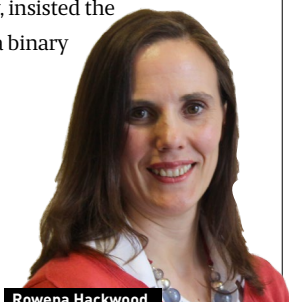
New commissioning guidance published by the DfE during the summer sets out how regional directors should assess "strategic need" and trust quality before ruling on academisation plans.

The document said the five pillars would underpin decisions. Regional directors would link various evidence to each pillar, including "headline metrics" – drawn from MAT performance tables – which would then be used to "form a hypothesis about a trust's quality".

These include phonics pass rates, the percentage of 'good' and 'outstanding' schools in a chain and attainment trajectories.



Tom Campbell



Rowena Hackwood



David Withey

ON LOCATION



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# Fears about safeguarding 'out of proportion'

Schools' fears about the safeguarding judgment in Ofsted inspections are "out of proportion", the watchdog's national director for education has said.

In an address to the Schools and Academies Show on Thursday Chris Russell emphasised that just 1 per cent of inspections in 2022-23 resulted in ineffective safeguarding judgments.

It was also "extremely rare" for the "only issue" to be safeguarding – accounting for less than 0.1 per cent of inspections last year.

Some leaders have said Ofsted's approach to safeguarding means schools can be rated 'inadequate' based on what sometimes turns out to be an administrative mistake.

Russell said Ofsted was trying to address concerns through webinars and clarification of its handbook.

The watchdog was "very keen to do



more because what we don't want is for people to be unnecessarily worrying about safeguarding".

"That's the problem; they worry about it to an extent that is actually out of proportion to what the reality is."

In June, Ofsted announced changes to inspections – including faster revisits for schools graded 'inadequate' over safeguarding – following the death of headteacher Ruth Perry.

# Falling pupil numbers will not close schools

The government has no plans for "significant school closures", despite a national fall in pupil rolls.

Primaries have been struggling to fill reception classrooms following a 13 per cent dip in the birth rate since 2015.

When asked about the crisis this week, Baroness Barran said: "There has been quite a lot of discussion and some pressure that we should close schools because of the change in pupil numbers.

"There's a real caution about that because when we came into government in 2010 we inherited a period in which school places were being closed. We then had to build places for a million children. That was an extremely expensive thing to do."

Barran also revealed the pipeline of schools wanting to convert and become academies "is particularly strong". There was "greater interest than there has been for many years".

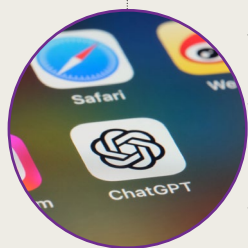
# Public confidence stops exam board using AI

Artificial intelligence could quality-assure exam markers from "tomorrow morning", but "public confidence" was holding it back, said Colin Hughes, AQA's chief executive.

While ChatGPT in particular had attracted a lot of attention, "it may even be materially not very important or interesting" compared with other technologies.

He said his organisation was interested in the potential for AI to mark and generate exam questions.

"We could use AI pretty much tomorrow morning to mark markers. Machines marking human markers ... it's very easy to do that.



"Why aren't we saying we're doing it? Public confidence. That's the only issue. It's fundamentally the same issue as driverless cars – they don't knock down and kill so many people as

humans, but still we don't seem to want them."

Dr Jo Saxton, Ofqual's chief regulator, has previously said she would not allow robots to take over marking pupils' work.

But she said AI had a place to do things "like quality assurance of human marking, spotting errors. But it cannot and will not replace humans. Ofqual is going to make sure of that."

# DfE mulls school solar panel plan

Ministers are considering installing solar panels on disused school land to help them generate their own electricity.

Baroness Barran, the academies minister, said her department was trying "to maximise the value when schools have significant excess land".

She said the DfE was "doing work to see whether we could use some space for solar panels so that schools could generate their own electricity".

Officials are also looking into building affordable housing on sites with excess land, which would raise money and "provide much-needed housing".

Documents seen by *Schools Week* show that LocatEd, the government-owned company set up to buy and develop land for free schools, last year "received a commission to review 316 sites" for so-called "under-utilised" or "surplus" land.

The company previously suggested school roofs could be used for solar panels and car parks for electric vehicle-charging outside school hours.

# Free school policy 'lost its way', say reformers

## SCHOOLS WEEK REPORTER

@SCHOOLSWEEK

The chair of the charity set up by ministers to promote free schools has said the government's flagship policy has "lost its way".

David Ross, the Conservative party donor who is chair of trustees at the New Schools Network (NSN), said the free school scheme had become "too slow, too bureaucratic and too closed to new ideas".

A report from the NSN, published to mark the formal launch of its £1 million innovation fund, called for ministers to make a "long-term commitment" to free schools, including a "renewed" focus on "promoting innovative approaches".

Ross is joined by former directors of the charity – many of them Conservative policy leaders – and ministers in his rallying call to refocus on the free schools scheme.

Fifteen free schools were approved in August. However, the report said the future of the programme remained uncertain, "with no timetable for future application waves".

### 'We're at risk of going backwards'

Ross, who also founded the David Ross Education Trust, said the report documented wider policy lessons from the scheme.

But it also revealed the way that the free school policy had lost its way, becoming "too slow, too bureaucratic and too closed to new ideas".

"This poses a threat not just to the quality and number of future free schools, but to the quality of the wider school system, which they help to challenge. Without a dynamic free school programme, we are at risk of going backwards."

The NSN is winding down after losing its government contract to support free schools to Premier Advisory Group.

The charity's reserves will now form a fund offering grants of between £5,000 and £50,000 to schools that have "innovative ideas to solve issues in education, helping the most disadvantaged". It is open to free schools and trusts with free schools.

The report also said future free school rounds should



David Ross

"reserve space for projects outside of areas with a basic need for school places – allowing communities to make their own case for a new school".

While the first waves of free schools were dominated by community or parent-led applications, most are now run by academy trusts.

Despite a huge drop in pupil numbers over the next ten years, the report said the "ease" in school place demand would allow free schools "once again to empower communities that want better quality school provision".

### 'Reform zeal unquestionably disappeared'

Rachel Wolf, the founding director of the NSN in 2009 and now a founding partner of consultancy Public First, which wrote the report, added that the zeal for school reform had "unquestionably disappeared".

Michael Gove, the former education secretary, said the free schools policy gave "greater autonomy to those running public services" and provided a template for how Whitehall "can operate at its best".

"We must not lose sight of them as the free school programme evolves."

Lord Agnew, a former academies minister, said putting "control back in the hands of school leaders" was a "principle that future governments must preserve: that our teachers and headteachers – not Whitehall officials – should take charge of

solving the challenges facing children in their area".

Nick Gibb, the former schools minister, said it was vital that a focus was kept on school autonomy and that proper backing was given to the role that free schools could play in unleashing new thinking.

### 'Too loose on approving applications'

Despite the free school programme causing issues – including many closing or being rebrokered because of underperformance – the report included little criticism.

However, Gibb admitted ministers in the early stages of the programme were "probably too loose in approving applications that were teaching a curriculum that wasn't evidence-based".

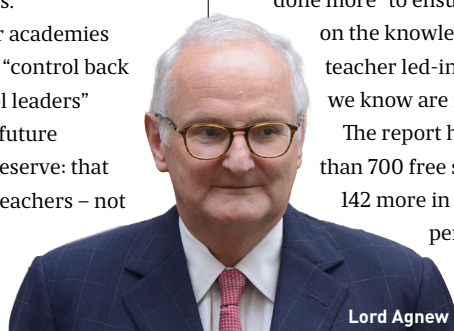
"These are free schools that subsequently went on to fail. And there were too many applications with too little focus on the importance of the curriculum. We should have rejected those proposals even if it meant fewer free schools opening."

Lord Nash, another former academies minister, also said the government could have "done more" to ensure free schools "focused on the knowledge-rich curriculum and teacher led-instruction models that we know are most effective".

The report highlighted that more than 700 free schools are open, with 142 more in the pipeline. Twenty-five per cent had been rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted.



Nick Gibb



Lord Agnew

# Ofsted reform: Reports set out path to change

AMY WALKER

@AMYRWALKER

Two reports this week set out proposals for how Ofsted reform – and linked changes to regulation – could work. Here's what you need to know ...

## Ditching school inspections 'not in tune with real world'

Inspectors should have no contact with schools, which should instead conduct "self evaluation", the Beyond Ofsted inquiry set up to find a new inspectorate model has proposed.

While Ofsted would still inspect academy trusts, schools should quality assure themselves – with a focus on areas such as wellbeing and curriculum "validated" by a school improvement partner (SIP) from a trust or council.

Action plans would be published, but not graded, and schools would not be held accountable by the Department for Education.

However John Jerrim, professor of education and social statistics at University College London's Institute of Education, said the report felt like it was not "really in tune with the real world".

SIPs were "ill thought through", and could "open up a somewhat murky private sector of such partners".

Under the model, safeguarding inspections would also be separated from Ofsted and conducted "under the governance of a national safeguarding body".

The report, published on Monday, said this would later become the responsibility of local authorities when they were "deemed ready", following a "lack of resourcing over the last decade".

But the deputy chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts, Steve Rollett, said any alternative agency would risk losing the "expertise" of the watchdog and "be more expensive at a time funds are scarce".

Labour has also outlined plans to introduce an annual review of safeguarding, separate to routine inspections but within Ofsted's remit.

Rollett also raised concerns this would mean local authorities "effectively inspecting themselves" as they were still responsible for some schools.

The inquiry, funded by the National Education Union, which campaigns to abolish Ofsted, set out proposals for the



inspectorate to instead inspect school groups – trusts, councils and federations – every three to five years. They would focus on leadership and governance, as well as "capacity" for self-evaluation.

Emma Knights, the co-chief executive of the National Governance Association (NGA), supported the inspection of MATs and a "greater recognition" on governance during inspections.

But she was "not convinced" local authority inspections would provide the "same assurance" for schools.

## 'Perfect time' for new intervention discussion

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) also set out a blueprint for how Labour's proposed overhaul and new school improvement model could work.

The institute's report, which the NGA and leader's union ASCL said reflected their own calls for inspection reform, was met with less scepticism.

The IPPR said the government should consult on a "narrative-driven" report for parents, accompanied by a "simple" dashboard on pupil progress data.

More detailed and technical reports could be provided for the school and regulator, with judgments made on whether action was needed in each of the separate inspection framework areas.

Tom Middlehurst, an inspection specialist at ASCL, said the move would provide parents with a "fuller picture of a school's provision" while also "removing the punitive and counter-productive

consequences" of the current system.

The IPPR also suggested a trial of a three-tier regulatory response to inspection outcomes.

'School-led development' would apply to schools judged 'good' or 'outstanding' under Ofsted's current regime, with schools expected to pursue "collaborative" self-improvement.

This could happen through a trust, or partnership with a national network or area-based partnerships. Subsequent inspections would review how it had progressed.

'Enhanced support', likely to apply to schools at present judged as 'requires improvement', would allow the regulator to decide whether the school could improve with additional support and oversight or was in need of a change of governance.

Regional directors would help a school, and its LA or trust, to develop an improvement plan to identify what support was needed. The school would then be provided with resources to deliver the plan.

'Immediate action' would apply to cases where the regulator judged that insufficient progress had been made or necessary improvements could not be delivered under current governance arrangements.

Schools would be re-brokered to a new "academy trust or local authority" and could require the governing body to be replaced.

Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the leaders' union NAHT, said the link between outcomes and intervention was "no longer working and a new approach is required".

"The arrival of a new chief inspector means that now is the perfect time for that conversation to take place."



Emma Knights



# Opinion: Ofsted reform

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## CAROLINE DERBYSHIRE

CEO, Saffron Academy Trust and  
Chair, Headteachers' Roundtable

### Thinking beyond Ofsted is now mainstream – and success beckons

**The Beyond Ofsted inquiry shows that what was once radical is now within reach if we keep pushing for smarter school accountability, writes Caroline Derbyshire**

In 2020, The Headteachers' Roundtable asked Ofsted to pause; to stop what it was doing and think about the harmful consequences of what had become a painful and bruising inspection regime for very many headteachers. It invited all school-based employees to consider standing down as inspectors.

Just a few months later, a global pandemic meant a pause occurred anyway, but by 2022-23 we were back to the pre-pandemic routine of regular school inspections and career-breaking and community-destroying school gradings.

The Roundtable continued to call for a removal of the grading system, for a re-introduction of the notion of 'context' into inspections, for a commission to reframe school inspection, and for a separation between inspection and annual safeguarding audits.

In 2020 it felt brave for school leaders to speak out in that way, but since the tragic death of Ruth Perry in January 2023 the calls for an end to grading have become deafening

from many quarters, including ex-inspectors and HMIs. The removal of school gradings in favour of a school report card is one of the significant policy changes proposed by the Labour Party if it wins the general election.

Pausing Ofsted has become a mainstream idea.

I was delighted, therefore, to be asked to represent The Headteachers' Roundtable on the advisory board of the Beyond Ofsted inquiry launched in the spring. The board, which was brilliantly chaired by former schools minister, Lord Jim Knight, met regularly and picked its way through a body of research on inspection including global alternatives, an extensive survey of educators' views of inspection, and feedback from focus groups of teachers, parents, governors and school leaders.

What was fascinating about the advisory group is that we did not agree on a whole range of educational issues depending on our professional experiences and the bodies we represented.

But, when faced with the research, the international inspection models and the survey outcomes, we each concluded that England was an outlier in terms of the way it inspected its schools; that the mechanisms of Ofsted have a



“ There was not one voice of dissent in the room

number of negative effects including on teacher wellbeing, school improvement and performance; and that without substantial reform it had outlived its usefulness.

There was not one voice of dissent in the room over these conclusions.

The advisory body was keen not simply to provide a critical analysis but to be practical in offering solutions and alternatives to the current Ofsted regime. It did not call for an abolition of Ofsted. Instead, it pragmatically and moderately agreed that schools need to be accountable to their communities and that parents have a right to know key information about their local school: its contextual challenges, what it does well and what it is working on.

It was also agreed that, while schools should carry out robust self-evaluation, an expert outside eye would ensure that there would be challenge to internal perceptions and performance data. If this challenge is to be meaningful and result in improvement, it needs to happen over time and in partnership with the school.

Additionally, it was felt that, in

common with financial audits, safeguarding audits should be conducted annually by a separate body. This would mean that safeguarding assurance could be communicated more regularly to parents so that any issues arising can be speedily addressed.

The full report is worth reading. It is timely and The Headteachers' Roundtable strongly believes that its recommendations should be adopted by whichever government is formed after the coming general election.

It's now no longer radical to be asking for these changes, but any departure from the current model will feel radical to many. It is up to us as a profession now to make the case that the crises in recruitment, retention, wellbeing and more that characterise our system demand it, to show that we don't shy away from accountability, and to convince our communities that they have a right to expect so much better than what they are getting.

We are making a winning argument. With this report in hand, we can seize the political moment and turn the tide.

# Opinion: Ofsted reform

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## LOIC MENZIES

Visiting Fellow,  
Sheffield Institute of Education

## Reforming accountability hinges on lowering the stakes

**We won't fix inspection until we reform the consequences of inspection, argues Loic Menzies**

The classic model for giving policy advice is to propose three options: a radical but impractical one, a 'do nothing' option, and an ambitious but practical solution. When it comes to Ofsted, all three paths have now been spelled out.

On one hand, inspectors could be kept out of schools completely, to be replaced by self- and peer evaluation and new inspections of school groups. This model, proposed this week by Beyond Ofsted, might work as a model for self-led improvement where the right leadership, management and governance are in place.

However, it wouldn't reassure parents that provision has been independently and impartially reviewed. As one parent pointed out on the radio, schools shouldn't 'mark their own homework'.

As explored in a soon-to-be published report by Public First, claims that parents crave one-word judgements are overblown. However, they also value inspection and care about more than headline exam measures. Moreover, if a school improvement partner is tasked with reviewing whether

a school has improved, they are in effect being asked to judge the effectiveness of their own support.

Peer and self-evaluation can't be the basis for deciding whether standards are up to scratch. I have worked in schools that weren't good enough and in schools where pupils were systematically being excluded by the back door. They are rare exceptions to the thriving environments hard-working teachers and leaders build for pupils all over the country. But for anyone stuck in these struggling settings, change often can't come soon enough.

So, should we just leave things as they are? Certainly not. Too much hangs off the current grading system and this means the stakes have been dialled up far too high. Ofsted's one-word judgements can kick off a chain of consequences that goes far beyond what the reliability of these gradings merits.

Even though most schools report being happy with how their inspection was conducted once it has taken place, a culture of frightened compliance reigns. Leaders of outstanding schools fear the loss of their elusive gold star and those graded 'good' either chase the affirmation of an upgrade, or succumb to panicked self-defence in the face of a potential downgrade.



“ Too much hangs off the current grading system

For those below the 'good' threshold, criticism is too rarely accompanied by commensurate support.

A third option is set out in 'Improvement through empowerment', a new report I authored for the IPPR think-tank. Like many, I agree that single-word judgements are past their best-by date. However, the problems attributed to inspection are largely problems of inspection's consequences – something that was emphasised in recent education select committee hearings. The inspection process itself requires improvement, but problems won't disappear until we fix the consequences.

Doing so depends on clarifying the link between inspection and regulation, something 'Beyond Ofsted' also call for. Presently, inspection can trigger an automatic regulatory response such as an academy order. That decision should be based on an assessment of how well-placed the school is to deliver the necessary improvements; whether its current trust or local authority has the capacity to support it; and what

other support is available locally.

Ofsted should stick to describing the state of schools, as well as reviewing the support that trusts and local authorities provide. And as to the regulator (currently the regional DfE teams), their role should be to pick a way forward in discussion with school providers and informed by Ofsted and local insight.

Most of the time, 'school-led improvement' like that described by Beyond Ofsted will be an appropriate way forward. Others will need 'enhanced support'. This should be selected by the school in discussion with a National Leader of Education, and additional resource should be provided where needed to ensure challenge is combined with support. Only occasionally will more robust, 'immediate action' be needed.

England's pupils, parents and teachers deserve a system that supports them to be the best they can be. They also deserve to be protected from the harm of poor standards. *Improvement through Empowerment* provides a practical way of making that a reality.



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Profile

JESSICA HILL | @JESSJANEHILL

# Taking the law into her trust's own hands

**Claire Pannell, one of the country's youngest family court judges, is putting her decision-making and dispute resolution skills to good use as Anthem Schools Trust's legal counsel**

Claire Pannell reckons she might be the only person in the country with her job title. While many trusts have a director of governance, she can't find any that also have their own "general counsel" – the joint roles that she fills at Anthem Schools Trust.

Maintained schools call on local authority legal departments when they get into hot water, while trusts tend to use specialist law firms. Pannell says having that in-house expertise means she can be "proactive" in "preventing legal challenges from

happening", rather than firms on retainers who are normally "always firefighting".

She was appointed a family law judge this year (aged just 40, it's also likely she's one of the country's youngest), providing a rare and overarching perspective of the justice and education systems.

A legal mind also gives her "complementary skills" that come in handy: Pannell also acts as Anthem's data protection officer and company secretary. She's also transforming the trust's

governance systems to give pupils a seat at the table.

## **Fighting for education**

Pannell has a crisp English accent, refined mannerisms and exudes a bold sense that the world is her oyster. She puts her drive and ambition down to having had to "fight for education" herself.

Her dad was a forklift driver (both parents left school at 13) and her education at Ryeish Green secondary "wasn't good at all".

But the school, in Reading, Berkshire, was shut by

## Profile: Claire Pannell



Malawi Headteacher office

the council in 2010 and replaced by Oakbank – now one of the 16 schools Anthem runs across Thames Valley, London and the East Midlands.

Pannell has returned there in her current role, but she says the corridor from the headteacher's office evokes "bad memories of being bullied".

She recalls how the school only offered two A-levels when she attended. Pannell and her friends had to persuade the local college to send a tutor so they could take A levels in sociology.

They also got involved with extra-curricular activities including young enterprise competitions which "we just kept winning". "That gave me this drive to keep aiming higher than people expected of me."

### Snakes in a classroom

After studying law at Bristol University, Pannell landed a job for law firm Veale Wasbrough Vizards specialising in education. Aside from being asked tricky questions by mostly independent school clients – such as whether snakes could be kept in a classroom ("yes, apparently") – Pannell carved out a role providing immigration advice for education visa applications.

But she wasn't motivated by "earning money for the partners", and she wanted a career where the "moral purpose was clear".

So, in 2012 Pannell moved to the charity Education Development Trust (previously CfBT Education Trust), which until last year sponsored Anthem. Pannell was EDT's senior education consultant and solicitor, a role which meant she could indulge her love of travelling (the list of countries she's backpacked around is impressive).



## 'It's eye-opening to discover how much of a privilege education can be'

There were trips to the Middle East and projects replicating Ofsted inspections overseas, a girls' education project in Kenya, and tours of schools in Malawi. One school was just a "tiny shack", with the headteacher's office a "chair in the grass – so peaceful, under a beautiful mango tree", she fondly remembers.

It was "eye-opening" to discover "how much of a privilege education can be. It's a whole other ballgame when girls can't go to school legally, or practically if they have their period."

### Changing the Anthem

The travelling element became less attractive after Pannell became a mum and she switched to working just with UK schools. But after around six years as head of legal, she decided to fulfil a lifelong dream of becoming a judge – which she now does on unpaid leave throughout the year alongside her general counsel role.

One of the key skills she must hone is "judgecraft" – the art of decision-making. It's something Pannell already does "on a low level

everyday". But she also became governor of two schools (Lime Hills and Hans Price academies in Cabot Learning Federation) to get decision-making experience on complaints panels and disciplinary committees.

Her judge training has made her acutely aware of the "unconscious bias" governors on exclusion panels have as "critical friends" of heads and in "supporting the school". She made a training pack for governors to foster awareness of that.

She's also summarised lengthy legal exclusions guidance into a "checklist" for heads to "tick through ... All the law around it is so prescriptive ... they're not lawyers and can't read all that".

### SEND legal pinch point

But the biggest "legal pinch points" that trusts face are around providing pupils with SEND support. "Heads want to do so much more, but the funding's not there". The "ridiculous" CAMHS waiting list also throws up "lots of legal risks" because "you've got disability discrimination if you're not making reasonable adjustments".

# Profile: Claire Pannell

Parents' complaints have been "absolutely skyrocketing" since Covid, but Pannell has been able to "take some of the pain out" of the process for heads.

Most schools have three complaint stages – the last being a panel including an external representative. It is in trusts' interests to avoid reaching that point, so Pannell added another pre-panel stage as an "additional opportunity to resolve the complains in house".

She's also created a trust-wide complaints handling network, with each school having their own coordinator (given legal training in complaint resolution) feeding up to a national complaints lead.

Every complaint is "logged with timeframes, and responses are templated", meaning they are "resolved much lower down the scale". Only around four a year now get to the panel stage, compared to "three to four a week" at another similar sized trust she knows of.

## Reimagining governance

Pannell has also put her legal skills to good use by "reimagining" Anthem's governance structures.

As trusts' governance is still based on the maintained school model, she believes there's a "disconnect" that "leads to confusion, with people not understanding their responsibilities and loads of duplication".

"You've got governors squirreling away reviewing outcomes without necessarily being educationalists, and reviewing budgets without being accountants.

"And who's listening? That information might connect into the head, but then it's stuck there in a MAT [multi academy trust] where lots of the infrastructure sits above them."

Pannell started by rebranding governors as 'community council members', a "really controversial" move to some who "liked having 'governor' on their CV".

She held a consultation on what the remits for the new councils should be, and four emerged – community; celebration (of successes); panels; and SEND, inclusion and safeguarding.



**'You have governors reviewing budgets, without being accountants'**

## 'Need to listen to pupils more'

Anthem is also training up volunteer 'champions' to take on roles as "experts" in safeguarding, climate change, SEND and inclusion and staff issues.

Two of the champions will be pupils, named "Timi champions" after the pupil who came up with the idea. Timi, a St Marks Academy pupil, brought a roomful of education leaders "to tears" after being invited by Anthem to speak about the personal challenges he overcame.

Afterwards, he "tapped Mohsen on the shoulder" and told him, "you need to listen to students more".

A termly forum will link Timi Champions from across schools, with training provided for them to understand "how trusts and schools work".

While most of the forums will be online, plans are afoot to hold the first one in person at the Houses of Parliament.

The champions will, after gathering feedback from other pupils, give each issue discussed a RAG [red/amber/green] rating to be fed into



Pannell at Lambs Lane primary school with best friend Penny and favourite primary teacher Miss Ellen, age 8



Backpacking

a dashboard. This isn't a token gesture, but a "genuine way we can hear the student voice".

Pannell compares the potential impact to the effect that doing extracurricular activities had on her at school.

"It can really elevate pupils to see what else is going on."

# Opinion

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DAISY CHRISTODOULOU

Director of education at No More Marking and co-host of the podcast Lessons from History

## Covid has broken the old habit of going to school

**The numbers of persistent absentees has almost doubled since Covid. Are there any lessons to be learned from the past, asks Daisy Christodoulou**

**R**ates of school absence have increased dramatically since Covid. More than a quarter of all secondary pupils are now defined as persistent absentees, missing at least 10 per cent of school sessions. Primary numbers are not much better.

Is there anything we can learn from the past about how to deal with absenteeism? On a recent episode of my podcast, *Lessons from History*, we looked at how the introduction of compulsory education in the late 19th century led to an intensive state effort to get all children in school.

But many parents were reluctant. Some depended on their children's labour; others resented the state telling them what to do. And then, as now, illness was a problem. In London schools of the 1890s, outbreaks of ringworm, measles and chicken pox limited the time children spent in schools.

The government reacted with a mix of carrot and stick. Many of the early state school buildings

were beautifully designed and built. They were often nicer than pupils' homes, with airy classrooms and lots of natural light. In fact, the buildings were so nice, and the educational offer so good, that some local authorities worried that rich families were sending their children to them when they should have been paying their own way!

Many of these brick buildings are still in use as schools or accommodation. We recorded a separate podcast about these iconic structures and were amazed by the number of teachers who spoke fondly about their time teaching or studying in them.

Over time, many schools further encouraged attendance by abolishing attendance fees, and establishing links with charities that provided free meals, clothing and medical care.

But there were punishments for non-attendance too, some of which today seem exceptionally harsh.

Local school boards employed a small army of school visitors – often ex-policemen or military men – who gathered details on all the families in an area and ensured the children attended school. They were nicknamed “kid-coppers” and often met with insults and lies.



“ The first schools were often nicer than pupils' homes

Parents could be fined, taken to court and even sent to prison if their children kept missing school. In 1876, one blind and ill father, John Speer, was fined 2s6d because one of his three children did not attend school. He was unable to pay and was sentenced to five days in prison. *The Times* reported on his case, which resulted in donations of more than £3 to Speer and his family.

Still, this mix of incentives and punishment worked. By 1909, school attendance of 5-14-year-olds was up to 90 per cent. It didn't get much higher in the decades after that. Just before Covid, it was at about 95 per cent, and now it's down at 92.5 per cent. But the more significant post-Covid shift is not in overall absence, but in the number of persistent absentees, whose numbers have almost doubled.

So what can we learn from this history of tackling absenteeism?

One of the most interesting insights from observers at the time was the way that all of the initial state efforts meant that school-going quickly became a habit. As the first generation of pupils grew up and became parents themselves, they were more likely to send their own children to school. School had become the new normal.

The worry today is that Covid has broken that norm, and that a similar mix of rewards and punishments will be needed to restore it. Schools and political parties are proposing policies that have a lot in common with what was tried in the 19th century: better food, facilities and healthcare in the form of breakfast clubs, new school buildings, and mental health hubs, but also more sanctions in the form of increased fines and the removal of child benefit. We'll have to wait and see if they will have the same impact.

# Opinion

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## JUSTINE GREENING

Former secretary of state for education

### We must make space for applied learning in the curriculum

**We have over-balanced education towards academic learning to the detriment of vital skills for life and employability, writes Justine Greening**

This country has always had an academically driven education system and our political debate continues to centre around that. But in recent years, an increasing focus on skills, apprenticeships and technical education demonstrates a broader truth – simply, that applied learning matters, and it matters across the whole of education.

Young people in today’s world are constantly told by employers that a whole range of non-academic capabilities matter, whether teamwork, resilience, creativity, empathy and other skills we all need day to day. They’re told that they need to understand the world of work, of business and how our economy works so that they can prepare themselves to be part of it.

Teachers know preparation for work and employability skills matters too, and they also know that right now our education system struggles to deliver that. A staggering 79 per cent of teachers believe that today’s pupils are

less prepared for the world of work compared to previous years. That’s bad from a social mobility perspective; if these skills matter, we need an education system that closes important gaps and doesn’t just ignore that they are there.

The question is how to do that effectively. The good news is that fusing more applied learning – the practical use of knowledge and skills in real-world situations through project-based activities – across our education system is a key way we can make real progress. We can learn from schools that already do this well. It’s a way that our education system can also feel more relevant for students and for employers.

There’s a chance to introduce more applied learning at an early age in a way that really helps children’s learning through a more stimulating approach that not only makes sense in their wider life but at the same time is also genuinely helping them get prepared for the world they’ll become part of as adults.

An important report published earlier this year by The Entrepreneurs Network (TEN) with Young Enterprise showcased a host of contributions from those already engaged in delivering



Akshata Murty hosts Young Enterprise Lessons at Number 10 last week

“ Academic attainment will continue to be crucial, but it’s not enough

applied learning. It highlighted the difference it is already making as well as the benefits of doing even more. It has been shown to boost young people’s confidence and engagement levels and contributes to better attendance records and improved academic results.

Those examples include primary schools taking part in the Young Enterprise Fiver Challenge, in which pupils are given a pledge of £5 and have to come up with ideas to make more money from it. They design logos, do market research, develop products and hone a sales pitch, providing opportunities to develop skills and practise making independent financial transactions in a controlled setting, utilising applied learning to embed financial education.

It is now up to policymakers to shape an education system that will produce the talent pool our country needs and to make sure everyone, regardless of background, has

access to opportunity. They’ll be doing that against the backdrop of the impact Covid has had on learning but we also know that just focusing on the same narrow academic approach as in the past isn’t going to deliver the outcomes that we want.

While academic attainment will continue to be crucial, it’s not enough to enable our students to truly thrive once they’re in the workplace and pursuing opportunities. Applied learning can ensure relevance and relatability in young people’s learning at the same time as providing inspiration for potential future careers.

Let’s hope that whichever party is in government after the next general election, those ministers can take a fresh look at our education system to make the changes we now so badly need. It’s the key to unlocking greater social mobility and equality of opportunity.



# Opinion

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## NICK FLETCHER

Chair, APPG for issues affecting men and boys

### We must end the 30-year silence about boys' underperformance

**Boys have been at the wrong end of a gender attainment gap for three decades, and it is time we confronted it, says Nick Fletcher**

One of the many missions I gave myself when I was elected in 2019 was to shine a spotlight on issues affecting men and boys in our country. With colleagues, I set up an all-party parliamentary group (APPG) to do just that, with boys' educational underachievement being one of its key focus areas.

The APPG acts somewhat like a select committee. Witnesses are called, research interrogated, and a report made. This happened over the spring and summer, and our report was released on Sunday, International Men's Day.

We wanted to focus on boys' education because there has been a gender attainment gap for at least 30 years. Today, it affects boys of every age and stage from early years to SATs, and from GCSEs to university entry. Just over half of boys (56 per cent) meet the expected standard of reading, writing and maths at 11, compared with 63 per cent girls. This September, 34,000 fewer 18-year-old boys went to university than girls of the same age.

The evidence is in plain sight.

Yet, when we looked for national-level interest from the education community we found little. When we looked for action, proactivity, and interest from think tanks, foundations and government we found silence. When the team looked for research they found some, but it was not founded on large-scale trials. Much lay gathering dust on the policy bookshelves. Society does not care enough about boys.

Undeterred, we reached out to those few educationalists who were active in the field. There were many conclusions. Boys start school behind girls with lower language

skills, and many never catch up. Additional literacy support is not available or targeted for those who need it. Not being able to express themselves leads to disruption. Being behind means they cannot access the curriculum, leading to more disruption. Too many boys don't have fathers at home. In effect, some boys are behind because of the way the adult world interacts with them.

We sent out over 18,000 emails asking schools if they had closed the gap and how. We contacted four secondary schools who had done so in similar ways, despite not knowing each other. They have all done it by creating learning environments that allow boys to thrive, with some targeted literacy support for those who need it.

Their main conclusions are that the gap is not inevitable and that closing it is achievable. Their effective actions are founded on four key pillars:

a) They all have an institutional will and a culture that is focused on addressing the gap and that every staff member buys into.

b) They have all created a boy-positive school environment, all of which are inclusive, aspirational, and relational and built relationships with parents to support them. Boys are not seen as a problem to be managed. Instead, they are given access to role models and mentors and encouraged, pushed and helped to understand where their learning leads to.

c) They accept no excuses for poor performance, and discipline is applied fairly to all.

d) They also show they care about boys, as all society must – and the boys see it. They ignore negative narratives and the indifference that too many boys face. Instead, they embrace boys.

The APPG also heard debate about the impact of a lack of male teachers. Research shows that 80 per cent of teachers believe this is a problem, not because male teachers are better at teaching boys than female teachers but because boys will see learning is for them too. This is helpful for all boys, but especially for those without male role models at home.

Since we started communicating with the schools community about these findings, interest has spiked. A webinar with the headteachers from the schools mentioned above was full within two days. As ever, needed change begins with pockets of best practice disseminating their excellence.

No one at a national educational level has explained to me why they ignore the gender attainment gap, but our work gives me hope that a 30-year scandal can finally start to be acknowledged and addressed. Our boys deserve nothing less.

“ Society does not care enough about boys ”



# Opinion

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## COP28: Sustainability in education 2023



TIM  
CULPIN

Head of sustainability,  
REAch2 Academy Trust

### A little-known opportunity for more sustainable schools

**Working with housing developers in your local area could unlock ways to make school sustainability a local priority (and some funding too)**

The DfE Sustainability and Climate Change strategy has four vision statements. One of these is “a better environment for future generations: enhancing biodiversity, improving air quality and increasing access to, and connection with, nature in and around education and care settings”.

Within a funding climate that means school budgets are stretching to meet increasing demand, delivering on that vision can be a real challenge for schools and trusts.

However, the development of our outdoor space and the resourcing necessary to enhance sustainability and climate change education are undeniable priorities. Collaboration and communication are key to enhancing opportunities for schools to identify available funding for this important agenda. To that end, we have had some success with section 106 agreements (where developers pay for community benefits as part of planning permission) that others may benefit from.

An important caveat to start:

this funding route may not be available to all schools at all times. In brief, s106 agreements are contributions made by developers to provide or enhance community and social infrastructure. Where developers are undertaking large-scale building developments, they make monies available for local community projects to ensure wider needs are met.

These can be used for enhancing NHS support, better highways or community facilities and could include school provision. For example, a large new housing estate could result in a new school being built to service an increased population. However, some smaller pots may be available which can be used to create or enhance community gardens, play areas or biodiversity areas. There are proposals to abolish s106 agreements in favour of a more consistent consolidation infrastructure levy. This is already happening in certain local authorities.

In the meantime, I want to share just one example of how REAch2 has accessed s106 funding to enhance the local environment for learners and local communities.

Initial concerns about the proximity of a small new housing estate to one of our primary schools



“ Reaching out to developers could be a high-impact strategy

led us to engage early with the developers to discuss access and egress.

This early communication gave us an opportunity to discuss more creative activities. Our children were offered the chance to visit the building site. They were also made aware of decisions being made, which gave them a greater understanding of this real-life process and filtered through into their learning in the classroom.

But more than that, the growing relationship between the developer, the trust and the school has meant that we have been able to spot opportunities we might have missed. Under planning requirements, the developer had to make a biodiversity investment in the local area. This could have ended up going to a local park or sports ground.

Instead, we are in discussions to invest the grant within the school grounds in the form of a community garden or a forest school site.

And in addition to all of that, we have put the importance of creating opportunities for our learners to connect with nature in

and around school at the heart of local conversations. This ongoing discussion has also opened further liaison with the district council over the possibility of other s106-related funding. It may not be possible to obtain this, but we have gained a greater understanding of who to talk to locally, and likewise other local organisations are more aware of ours and our pupils' needs.

Accessing this funding is not always straightforward. The availability of these monies annually or geographically is not always transparent, which makes obtaining it challenging. Nevertheless, just reaching out to your local council and developers in the vicinity of your school could be a high-impact strategy.

Whether or not s106 funding is available, bringing decision makers together to think about young people's needs for green and sustainable community spaces could be transformative. Who better than school leaders to champion young people's access to and engagement with the environment and lead them onto their journey as its guardians and stewards.

# Solutions

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JANE GREEN

Chair, SEDSConnective

## Six practices to retain disabled and neurodivergent staff

**There is nothing inevitable about staff with needs and disabilities leaving the profession or choosing not to enter it in the first place, writes Jane Green**

I worked for many years in SEND roles before I received my own triad of diagnoses of autism, hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (hEDS) and ADHD. I was an assistant headteacher, a local authority advisory teacher for autism and education national lead for a large charity.

Though undiagnosed at the time, I had suspected I was different. I had battled many health issues and injuries including gastrointestinal problems, allergies, migraines, sprained ankles and shoulder subluxation. Walking with a stick to support my left leg, my right would buckle, leading to snide comments like “Did you forget which leg was meant to be the bad one?” Opening heavy fire doors and carrying stacks of books caused further pain and injury.

Yet, I was disbelieved by colleagues, medical practitioners and occupational health providers. I took early retirement at 53, but with the right support I could have remained in work.

Here are my top tips to help schools to retain staff who are neurodivergent, have long-term

conditions, or a disability.

**Be as flexible as possible**

Flexibility looks different for each individual. For some, it might be part-time work or reduced hours; for others, time and space during the working day, a place to stretch or even have a quick lie down. For many people with disabilities or chronic illnesses, regular healthcare appointments may be an important part of their wellbeing. Ensure they do not feel they need to apologise for this.

**Ask regularly – and listen**

What kinds of aids, support, and adaptations would help the member of staff do their job? People’s needs differ and can

change dramatically over time. Some disabilities have a regular and permanent impact on people’s lives, while others can wax and wane or even totally change in their presentation.

My undiagnosed conditions affected me in several ways. Sometimes I struggled with limb pain or stiffness. On other occasions, digestive symptoms or sensory issues were more problematic. Showing staff members an open door when it comes to talking about their changing needs will help them feel more supported.

**Celebrate and play to strengths**

Many disabled and neurodivergent people struggle to advocate for themselves because they are anxious about the potential consequences of ‘making a fuss’. Celebrating people for their strengths can help to build their confidence to speak up for their own needs – and those of disabled and neurodivergent students.

A ‘spiky’ profile (meaning a large difference in abilities across different kinds of tasks) is typical of autistic people. Their strengths can include strong focus, attention to detail and an ability to think outside

the box. Find autistic staff members roles that play to their strengths.

**Educate the educators**

Visible and invisible disabilities, chronic illness and neurodivergence are all protected characteristics. Educated advocates help staff with these characteristics to feel welcome, important and understood. Strong allies on the team help to relieve burden. Conversely, it only takes one colleague to make life impossible. Ensure everyone gets the message.

**Include don’t isolate**

Reduced energy, chronic pain and regular appointments can be isolating of themselves. More sick days, fewer meetings and shorter hours on site mean we can miss out on important team building, key announcements and other aspects of school life. Don’t let this happen. Put processes in place to ensure we stay informed and feel part of the team.

**Respect confidentiality**

Some may be very comfortable to take on a disability or neurodivergence awareness raising role within the school, including talking about their own diagnosis and how it impacts their lives. For others, it is an entirely private matter. Never pressure. We are not all wannabe influencers or activists, and nor should we have to be.

In a difficult recruitment climate, staff retention is more important than ever. Many experienced neurodivergent staff and those with long-term conditions or disabilities are quitting roles they love because they don’t feel supported.

Taking these six points into account could make the difference between someone staying or leaving. But more than that, it is fundamental to becoming the truly inclusive sector we all aspire to.

“ With the right support, I could've remained in work ”



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# THE REVIEW

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## SEQUENCING THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM

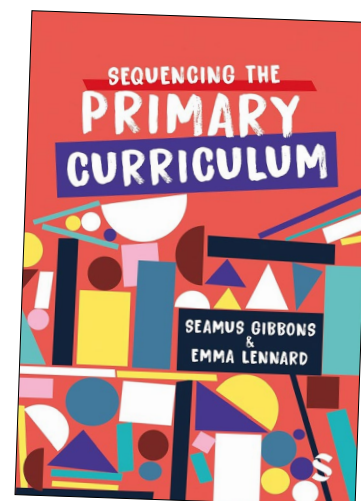
**Author:** Seamus Gibbons and Emma Lennard

**Publisher:** SAGE

**Publication date:** 2 October 2023

**ISBN:** 1529600731

**Reviewer:** Emma Cate Stokes, Key stage one phase lead, East Sussex



Imagine standing at the edge of a vast puzzle. Scattered in front of you are fragments of the complex jigsaw that is primary education. This is the daunting reality that faces many primary educators, and what Seamus Gibbons and Emma Lennard offer here is that all-important big picture to help us place each piece in its rightful spot.

*Sequencing the primary curriculum* took me back to my early days as a teacher, searching for clarity in this vast landscape. I wish I'd had access to this kind of resource, which provides precise and definitive answers to many of our sector's most pressing questions about the curriculum. Why should we sequence it? What benefits does it offer for children's learning? How do we execute it effectively?

Each subject area in the book is detailed with remarkable thoroughness, and each is presented as part of a holistic vision. From history to maths, Gibbons and Lennard provide a breadth of information that spans the entirety of the primary curriculum.

The structure of the chapters is particularly noteworthy. Each starts by highlighting the importance of the subject, setting the stage and context for what follows. This is followed by an exploration of subject-specific methods of sequencing, offering a logical pathway to structure teaching and learning.

But the book doesn't stop at theory; it also provides plenty of practical applications, ensuring that educators can directly implement what they learn. More than that, there are also progress indicators to gauge the effectiveness

of the imparted strategies for each area.

One criticism that could be levelled at the book is that the recurring emphasis on the importance of teachers' subject knowledge is somewhat overdone. For my part, I think it's particularly relevant to the book's intended audience. For early-career teachers who are still finding their footing, such reminders are not just helpful but essential. Not only is deep subject knowledge a cornerstone of effective teaching, but it also serves as a reminder that not all solutions can be found in a guide of this nature – no matter how comprehensive.

I found the early years section a particular highlight. It delves into the foundational years of a child's academic journey and shines a spotlight on the pivotal importance of this formative stage. This is invaluable for early-career teachers who may not be directly involved in teaching reception classes, ensuring that will appreciate how the knowledge and skills acquired then set the trajectory for subsequent learning.

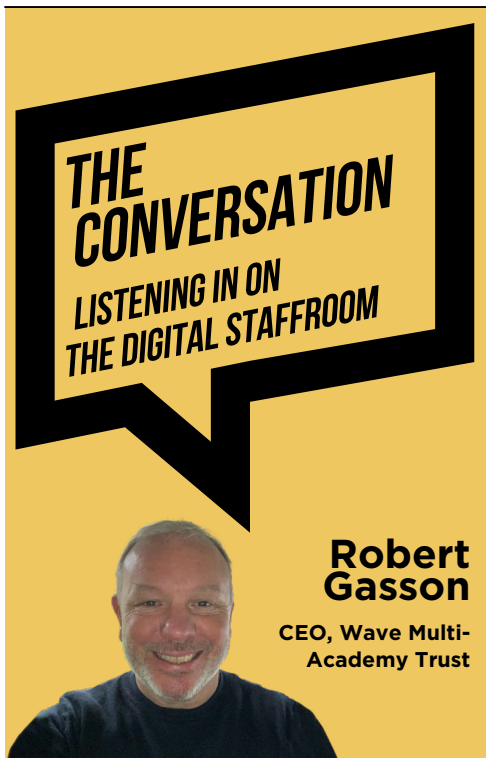
However, it's worth noting that while the early years sections provide an overarching understanding, there's a slight variance in depth across different subjects. Some topics delve deeper, painting a more detailed picture than others. But even with these variations, the overarching acknowledgement of each subject's role in the early years is commendable, underscoring the significance of early education but also crucially align it with the overall project of sequencing primary teaching and learning.

The book is mainly targeted at early-career teachers, and for that readership it is without doubt an essential read. Seasoned educators and those exploring curriculum design from the position of whole-school leadership are likely to find some parts basic. Nevertheless, its comprehensive nature can serve as a good refresher.

Indeed, one of the stand-out features is the inclusion of reflective questions at the end of each chapter that not only aid comprehension but also spur introspection. Having experience with trainee programmes, I can vouch for its potential utility for newcomers as well as those tasked with mentoring them.

*Sequencing the primary curriculum* offers clarity in the complex realm of primary education. For newcomers, it's a guiding light. For experienced educators, it's a resourceful handbook. It does a great job of encapsulating the essential insights of the primary curriculum, and with justified and widespread concern about how overcrowded it is, that is no mean feat.

★★★★☆  
Rating

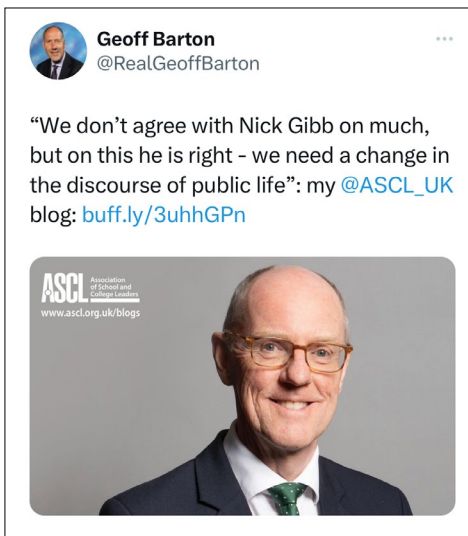


**Robert Gasson**  
CEO, Wave Multi-Academy Trust

**STRONG AND STABLE**

As a senior leader in education, I see my role as offering long-term stability and vision. This is very challenging in the current climate. Indeed, the very notion of stability seems out of kilter with the zeitgeist, as another reshuffle this week saw the resignation of Nick Gibb.

Some concentrated on what they saw as the damage he has caused and delighted in his departure. ASCL general secretary, Geoff Barton, gave perhaps a more considered approach.



Whatever your personal views, he served most of the past 13 years – a stability I doubt we'll see again in that role, and in sharp contrast to the 10 secretaries of state over

the same time frame.

Meanwhile, others still found the time to get very exercised despite all the turbulence. Mouhssin Ismail, the chief standards officer at City of London Academies Trust, started a fierce debate over the course of the weekend with [a tweet that praised silent line-ups and transitions](#), accompanied by a picture to illustrate.

Cheers and jeers predictably ensued, but in the polarised world of X, some balanced views can still be found.



It's surely fair enough to consider that silent corridors are (hopefully) part of a strategy and not an end in themselves. They might even be useful in certain contexts for a period of time to enable pupils to learn more orderly habits. Several of my peers are introducing concepts like this that I believe are at odds with being inclusive. However, I respect their right to and will continue to work professionally with them without resorting to the sort of poor behaviour that has become too regular in our discourse.

**KNOW AND BE ABLE**

And in another show of balanced takes this week, Daisy Christodoulou addressed another old chestnut that gets the profession exercised: skills vs knowledge.

In this blog, she takes us through Scotland's experience of introducing the 'Curriculum for Excellence' in 2010, which explicitly reduced content knowledge and organised the curriculum around a set of content-free skills statements like: "Using what I know about the features of different types of texts, I can find, select and sort information from a variety of sources and use this for different purposes."

As one of the curriculum's architects, Keir Bloomer is quoted in the blog as saying: "The problem is we did not make sufficiently clear that skills are the accumulation of knowledge. Without knowledge there can be

no skills."

So much for the dichotomy. I doubt anyone teaching media or mechatronics in a further education college would ever have thought otherwise – if anyone had bothered to ask them.

**JOINED UP AND ACCESSIBLE**

Finally this week, this blog by Our Community MAT executive inclusion officer, Cassie Young, titled SEND and systems: A reflection toolkit, offers a very comprehensive guide to SEND and inclusion as developed through her trust.

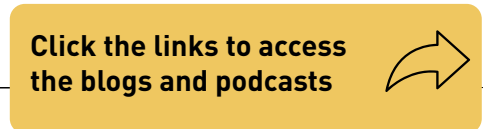
With some excellent examples of practice and policy, the blog starts from first principles with some fundamentals of SEND identification. Young describes this as an essential process at school and trust level to ensure all pupils receive appropriate support, demonstrating her commitment to finding that difficult balance between individual support and consistency of provision.

I couldn't help thinking again about our increasingly polarised social media debates and lamenting the old Twitter, which seemed to teem with useful content like this. I found myself nodding and taking notes as I made my way through it and wholeheartedly agreeing with her conclusions.

She clearly sets out the need for multi-agency collaboration and identifies the role of SENCo as vital to the implementation of any support strategy. But more than that, she puts the onus on leaders to 'get the big stuff right at the whole-school level' to empower their work, ensuring that strategy and practice align in the interests of the child.

Her final point (my caps) is a good reminder of why we chose to continue working in education: "Our job as trust and school leaders is to provide strategies, opportunities for planned collaboration, raise confidence of all practitioners and to share good practice wherever possible by joining up thinking, actions and reflections for the betterment of ALL children and their families."

And there we have it: A week defined by an uncharacteristic outbreak of balance in the edu-sphere. Well at least on my timeline. I hope it catches.



# The Knowledge

What we've learned about schools and their communities this week



## Can teaching through languages improve overall outcomes?

**Judith Woodfield, advisory group member, Learning Through Languages UK, Aston University**

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a form of bilingual teaching where a subject is taught by communicating in another language. It is a widely accepted technique across the world and is commonly used to teach English. Research shows it leads to gains in language proficiency and evidence of accelerated learning within the host subject. Indeed, countries with CLIL in over 11 per cent of their schools have leapt up the PISA tables in recent times.

Here in the UK, there are examples of schools that have taught subjects from science to PSHE through languages from French to Mandarin, but no significant longitudinal studies on its impact. Policy makers remain sceptical about its credentials. This week, I published a longitudinal study based on my own career-long experience of CLIL in three schools in England.

I began by teaching geography in French some 20 years ago and immediately witnessed the enjoyment of students and staff alike. Increasing numbers of students opted for the CLIL courses and we clearly saw improved attainment and progress in languages for all students whatever their background or ability. SATs results for the end of key stage 3 also indicated that there might be academic gains in other subjects too.

As the assistant head in charge of data and teaching and learning, I seized the opportunity to engage academics and reviewers to study our work objectively. This proved the short-term gains but also longer-term ones. Five years later, the CLIL cohort achieved higher rates of attainment at GCSE, many opting for A level French.

Later appointed as a deputy head for curriculum, it became a cornerstone of a creative curriculum judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted and cited by it for good practice. Here, academics confirmed that by key stage 4, in addition to languages, CLIL cohorts were making higher gains in other subjects with a lot of problem-solving too.

Later again, as headteacher I introduced CLIL at a school in a very deprived area. I continued to teach it too, and to monitor, track and review



### 'CLIL effectively eliminated the disadvantage gap'

its impact. I was stunned by its effectiveness at helping our students access the more challenging GCSE curriculum introduced by Michael Gove.

In all three schools, CLIL was introduced for between one and two hours a week in years 7 and 8 in addition to their normal MFL time. This relatively small investment of curriculum time provided a great return for MFL uptake and whole-school attainment and progress, and any increase in CLIL time led to greater gains.

Now, in my retirement, I have been able to combine the internal data for all three schools with the overall data from school performance tables to objectively reach conclusions about CLIL's value as a school improvement strategy.

As a data analyst, I discovered the statistically significant impacts all three schools had in common. As a teacher, I analysed the classroom techniques to evaluate what could have caused these impacts. The results were startling.

The components within the CLIL courses (delivered in a variety of subjects and languages) include many of the most effective techniques highlighted in the EEF's teacher toolkit: reading comprehension strategies, oral language interventions, metacognition and self-regulation,

collaborative working, feedback, challenging homework and use of digital technology.

With all of these conducted in a different language, it is no wonder that learning is accelerated.

Better still, all three schools show that gains were relatively greater for the most vulnerable students. Refugees with no English, hearing-impaired students, disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs all benefitted. CLIL effectively eliminated the disadvantage gap, driving inclusivity, higher Ebacc entries and results. Prior ability on entry did not determine CLIL students' success.

Headline figures for each school showed similar patterns. Once embedded in key stage 3, improvements in attainment and progress were evident across all subjects and were magnified at key stage 4, improving schools' national positions by an average of 21 per cent.

The reverse pattern is also clear. When CLIL stopped, key stage 4 results tapered back down as its effects phased out.

If our national ambitions are truly to close the disadvantage gap and to increase the uptake of languages, then CLIL warrants further investigation.



Week in

# Westminster

Your guide to what's happening in the corridors of power

## SATURDAY

Her Maj Amanda Spielman has started to do the rounds of exit interviews before she quits Ofsted next month. Today's turn was with *The Times*, where she raised lots of issues, including that schools are "tying themselves in knots" about transgender pupils as the government delays (and delays) promised guidance.

But WAY more important was *The Times'* picture showing Spielman has a framed version of the *Schools Week* front page of her as the Queen hanging up in her office!

## TUESDAY

A fancy new report today from the New Schools Network (the charity set up by the government to promote free schools) said it was, indeed, very good.

Cue lots of back-patting from those involved, but less critical insight into the scheme's failure – apart from this humdinger from the former-forever schools minister Nick Gibb.

He (rightly) assessed that ministers were "too loose" on approving free schools in the early days – but only those that were "teaching a curriculum that wasn't evidence-based. These are free schools that subsequently went on to fail."

Emmmm, some free schools crashed "spectacularly".

Take the two that closed amid an investigation into how hundreds of thousands of pounds of undeclared taxpayer cash was paid to companies linked to its owner. Or the one whose founder was sent to prison for fraud.

But let's blame it all on the bloody progs and their wacky curriculums, eh Nick?

PS. The NSN report read like a roll call of the key Tory education reformers of the past decade or so. All the past directors got to have their say about how great it all is, including Nick Timothy, Rachel Wolf and even Toby Young.

Bizarrely, Mark Lehain – the current special adviser to the education secretary – was missing. Word on the street has it this was because he was only an interim director.

PPS. The subsequent event to launch the report provided a temperature check of said edu A-listers' views of current education reform: they are not impressed.

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One of those attendees was Michael Gove, the former education secretary and very much the leader of the Tory edu reform crew.

As happens with Gove, he pops up regularly in education news, given the tremendous reform agenda he pursued/huge wrecking ball he swung (delete as applicable).

Today he was in the *Local Government Chronicle* talking about SEND and how it was sometimes difficult for councils to distinguish the "deserving" cases "rather than those with the loudest voices, or the deepest pockets, or the most persistent lawyers".

Fun fact: parents win 96 per cent of SEND tribunal hearings, suggesting very clearly that councils are abusing their legal duty to provide support and – those parents lucky

enough to have access to legal support or willing to spend their savings on it – are overwhelming "deserving".

## WEDNESDAY

A fresh scandal today as it emerged the DfE has "no policy on the study of warehousing or logistics".

Damian Hinds was forced into this major admission after a question from Tory MP Andrew Rosindell about whether he would "take steps" to include reference to both in the national curriculum.

But fear not, Hinds did make clear schools are free to study a whole host of topics outside the national curriculum, and "there is room for schools to incorporate warehousing and logistics in their curriculum should they wish".

Phew!

\*\*\*

Gove was also among the dignitaries helping Teach First celebrate its 20th anniversary this week.

He praised the teacher training charity's alumni, known as "ambassadors", as an "army of missionaries. Modern-day Jesuits, convinced that having seen a child in their formative years, they needed to transform the world in order to make sure that in business, the spirit of philanthropy, and in charities a spirit of enterprise was harnessed ... to help those disadvantaged children".

He even cracked a joke at his own party's expense.

"Obviously, in the next 20 years, I anticipate four terms of Conservative government...I've only had one glass of wine."





Academies Trust

## Senior Speech and Language Therapist

**Location:** One based in West Yorkshire and the other in The Northwest or Staffordshire

**Salary:** £44,000 to £50,000 + benefits

**Contract:** Permanent, 37 hrs per week, term time only or full time all year round.

**Are you an experienced Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) with the enthusiasm and motivation to work with children with a wide range of learning difficulties and disabilities, including autism?**

These unique and brand new opportunities allow you to work alongside committed school staff in a range of schools across the Trust in all the communities we serve. We aim to deliver an outstanding school experience to children with special educational needs and disabilities and their families. Many of our communities are the most deprived in the North of England.

The majority of your role will be focusing on pupils in our Primary schools but there would also be some support needed at Secondary level in the lower years. Your core responsibility will be to offer assessment and therapy work but also develop our staff to improve pupil experiences for children with a range of additional special

educational needs. This would mean working alongside the NHS Speech and Language intervention when required to ensure we maximise capacity that already happens in our schools. We want you to support the ongoing daily work, building capacity and expertise with your input within assessment and therapy strategies. We want our provision for SEN pupils to improve across the Trust developing into outstanding experiences and both appointments will help greatly with this key target.

We can offer the right candidate continued access to high quality professional development opportunities within a vibrant, friendly and dedicated school community.

If you would like an informal discussion about the post, please contact our lead for SEN across the Trust Dominic Wall Executive Headteacher [dominic.wall@coopacademies.co.uk](mailto:dominic.wall@coopacademies.co.uk)

[Click here to find out more](#)

## CHIEF EXECUTIVE



The Cam Academy Trust is seeking to appoint an outstanding leader to the post of Chief Executive. The Trust consists of four secondary schools, seven primary/infant schools and one associate primary school across South Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire. It also has four special units for children on the autism spectrum and runs both a Maths Hub and a SCITT. Founded in 2011, the trust has grown in size and reputation over the past 12 years and is in a sound financial position. It is entering its next phase of development and is looking for an inspirational and people-led individual to lead its continuing commitment to quality and school improvement, as well as a comprehensive development agenda. The successful applicant will be an innovator and excellent communicator, with a track record of change and people management.

The Trust has a very clear philosophy at its heart. It strives for 'Excellence for All' through a set of values-led principles, and these

will be at the heart of ongoing development and growth.

A core principle focuses on the communities which the Trust's schools serve. There is a strong emphasis on people: not just staff and students but also local families. The Trust empowers decision makers at every level to make appropriate choices in the context they know best. The successful applicant will therefore be a collegiate, inclusive and consultative individual, with an unwavering commitment to the founding principles of the Trust.

The Trust anticipates that the successful candidate will have significant leadership experience, quite probably in a MAT environment; perhaps as CEO, Deputy CEO or Director of Education. The Trust hopes to make the appointment in late Spring / Summer of 2024.

For information on how to apply for this position, please follow the link - Chief Executive, The Cam Academy Trust and submit your application by the closing date of 9am on 5th January 2024.

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