

SCHOOLS WEEK

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

Call for 'radical action' after 'catastrophic' teacher recruitment



P6-7

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'There is a risk of future deaths if only lip service is paid to learning from tragedies like this'



SCHOOLS WEEK

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Something positive must come from tragedy of Ruth Perry's death

"There is a risk of future deaths if only lip service is paid to learning from tragedies like this."

That is the stark warning from the coroner who oversaw the inquest into the death of Ruth Perry. It should provide a wake-up call for politicians.

The coroner ruled an Ofsted inspection contributed to the headteacher's death. She flagged several concerns about the accountability system and will produce a report aimed at preventing future deaths (page 4 and 5).

The immediate response from Ofsted and the government has been that they will listen. More changes have been promised.

But these are tweaks to the system based on specific criticisms from the coroner. It is not the bigger reforms many in the sector have long called for.

If a damning coroner's verdict does not spark more widespread change, something politicians seem to understand better may: the free market.

This week's "catastrophic" figures (page 6 and 7) show just half of the required secondary school teachers have been

recruited. Fifteen of 18 secondary subjects missed their target.

As Jack Worth says (page 23), this is a "near-universal set of shortfalls" that requires "urgent and radical action".

Unfortunately, that seems optimistic. The current government seems to be staggering through to next year's election. The focus has turned to the 'Advanced British Standard' qualification reforms and the pie-in-the-sky 'maths to 18' pledge.

The first of these priorities – for more qualification reform – looks even more bizarre after this week's PISA results suggested the government's reforms of the past decade have improved standards (page 10 to 12).

One positive initiative is the workload reduction taskforce, which is drawing on the best of the sector's expertise to come up with solutions. The focus on edtech could also make teaching less burdensome. And improving retention is just as important as boosting recruitment.

But workload is just one issue. The evidence from this week suggests a more radical rethink is required.

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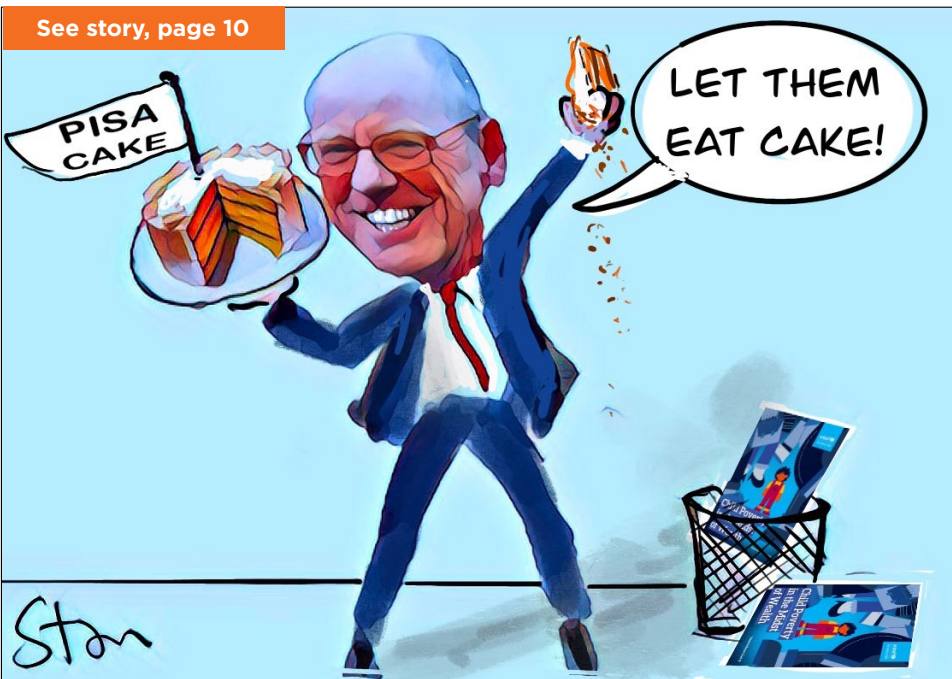


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Stan

Ofsted promises change after inquest rules inspection contributed to head's death

AMY WALKER & FREDDIE WHITTAKER
@SCHOOLSWEEK

Ofsted will delay inspections next week by a day to give lead inspectors urgent extra training on dealing with anxiety and when to pause their visits.

Amanda Spielman, the chief inspector of schools, apologised to the family of headteacher Ruth Perry, after an inquest into her death recorded a verdict of suicide, contributed to by an Ofsted inspection.

Coroner Heidi Connor said this week she would issue a "regulation 28" report aimed at preventing future deaths, stating she had concerns about the inspection system. She warned there is a "risk of future deaths if there is only lip service paid to learning from tragedies from this".

Ofsted: 'We will do more' to change

Spielman's controversial comment two weeks ago that critics had used Perry's death "as a pivot to try and discredit" was made "without any attempt to analyse the evidence more carefully", Connor added.

Ofsted has pledged to draw up training on "recognising and responding to visible signs of anxiety" during inspection. They "will be clear with inspectors what to do if a pause is needed".



Ruth Perry

Urgent training for lead inspectors will take place on Monday, and every school inspection due to take place next week will therefore be delayed by a day.

Ofsted said during the inquest it was possible to pause inspections because of teacher distress. But Connor said this was "something of a mythical creature, created and expanded on during the evidence at this inquest".

From next week, a new complaints hotline will also be set up for schools to report any

concerns about their inspection to a senior Ofsted official.

Connor ruled the inspection in November last year, where Caversham Primary School, Reading, was rated 'inadequate', was "at times rude and intimidating". The school was graded 'good' just seven months later.

Ofsted will also make clear in its inspection handbook that leaders can be accompanied by colleagues into meetings with inspectors and share inspection outcomes with others including family,



Amanda Spielman

Coroner's concerns over Ofsted system

1. The impact on school leader welfare that this system will continue to have
2. Almost complete absence of Ofsted training on dealing with distressed heads
3. Absence of a clear path to raise concerns during an inspection
4. The confidentiality requirement after an inspection
5. Timescales for report publication
6. No learning review into the circumstances of Caversham's inspection
7. Clarification to be sought on additional headteacher support

NEWS: OFSTED

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medical advisers and their wider support group.

Spielman added Ofsted had already “made changes to the way we work” and “we will do more”, pledging to “work hard to address” each concern raised by the coroner.

Inspection contributed to head’s death

Perry was headteacher at Caversham primary when it was rated ‘inadequate’ by inspectors following the visit last autumn.

Connor told Berkshire Coroners’ Court that following the judgment, “Ruth’s mental health deteriorated significantly”. The coroner said each witness who knew Perry, including her GP and a mental health practitioner, said the inspection “did contribute (more than minimally) to her death”.

“The evidence is clear in this respect, and I find very easily that Ruth’s mental health deterioration and death was likely contributed to by the Ofsted inspection.”

Connor found “parts of the Ofsted inspection were conducted in a manner which lacked fairness, respect and sensitivity”.

There had been “little, if any, reflection or insight into this issue from the lead inspector”. But she said it was “much more important to consider the system” the inspector was “working within”.

Ofsted gave evidence under oath that it had paused inspections before for reasons of headteacher distress. But Connor said she had “heard no direct evidence of this”.

‘We need more than lip service’

Under regulation 28, coroners have a “duty to make reports to a person, organisation, local authority or government department or agency where the coroner believes that action should be taken to prevent future deaths”.

Connor said “any form of inspection or review will always be inherently stressful”, and that she had “taken that into account in reaching my conclusions”. She added that “nobody would dispute that safeguarding is important”.

But her report will highlight seven areas of concern for Ofsted and the Department for Education (see box out), including the



Ruth (right) with Julia in Italy in 1996

Ruth’s death left an ‘unfillable hole in all our lives’

Julia Waters said her sister Ruth was not only a headteacher but a “wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, and a dear friend to so many people” whose death had “left an unfillable hole in all our lives”.

The coroner’s conclusions “validate what our family has known all along”.

The inquest had shown the “brutal inhumanity” of the inspection system, Waters added.

“The new chief inspector of schools faces a massive challenge to put these failures right,” she said.



“impact on school leader welfare that this system will continue to have”.

She said to Perry’s family that “Ruth is not a statistic to me”, highlighting a “tendency” for “some secretaries of state” to ignore concerns raised by coroners.

“I very much hope that will not be the case here,” she added.

Education secretary Gillian Keegan said Ofsted was “fundamental to making sure children are safe and receive the education they deserve”.

“Together we will look closely at the coroner’s recommendations to consider further changes to make sure we have an inspection system that supports schools

and teachers, and ultimately secure Ruth’s legacy.”

She added that “my heart goes out to Ruth’s family, friends and the school community. Her death was a tragedy that not only shocked the local community but also the wider sector and beyond.”

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'Full crisis': Just half of secondary recruitment target met

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

The government has missed its target for secondary teacher recruitment by 50 per cent, "catastrophic" figures show, leaving schools facing a "near-universal set of shortfalls" and prompting calls for "urgent and radical action".

Initial teacher training census statistics also show that the primary target was missed by 4 per cent, meaning the overall target for both phases has been missed by 38 per cent.

In total there were 26,955 new entrants to ITT in 2023–24, compared to 28,463 in 2022–23 and 40,377 in 2020–21.

The picture is worse for secondary than last year, when 57 per cent of the required secondary teachers were recruited. Secondary targets have now been missed in 10 of the past 11 years.

However, it is slightly better for primary, for which 91 per cent of the target was met in 2022–23.

Ministers failed to meet the target in all but three secondary subjects, with recruitment as low as 17 per cent in physics.

'Urgent and radical action required'

Jack Worth, school workforce lead at the National Foundation for Educational Research, said this constitutes a "full crisis of teacher supply and not just a challenge confined to the usual suspects".



The "huge extent and near-universal set of shortfalls" requires "urgent and radical action to improve the attractiveness of teaching as a profession to enter and remain", Worth added.

The figures will set government on a collision course with unions as ministers prepare to issue a remit to the School Teachers' Review Body for the September 2024 pay award. Poor recruitment levels often form the backbone of unions' argument for larger rises.

On the ground, it will further exacerbate recruitment woes for schools.

Just 63 per cent of the required maths teachers were recruited, down from 88 per cent last year. Seventy-four per cent of the English target was missed, down

from 82 per cent, and the proportion of the chemistry target met fell from 83 to 65 per cent.

There were also big drops in the proportion of the target missed in drama (111 to 79 per cent), art and design (88 to 44 per cent), religious education (75 to 44 per cent) and music (62 to 27 per cent).

Geoff Barton, general secretary of the ASCL school leaders' union, said the "catastrophic shortfall in postgraduate trainee teacher recruitment has plumbed new depths".

"The supply of new teachers is simply not sufficient to meet the needs of the education system and we then lose far too

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

JACK DYSON | @JACKDYDYS

Overseas teachers exempt from new £38,700 visa laws

Foreign teachers will be exempt from the government's new immigration crackdown.

Home secretary James Cleverly announced the pay threshold for those coming into the United Kingdom on a skilled worker visa would be lifted from £26,200 to £38,700 in the spring.

He claimed the move – which is part of a raft of visa changes – will mean "around 300,000 people who came to the UK last year would not have been able to do so".

But teachers will continue to be exempt. Currently, teachers



James Cleverly

listed in the government's national pay scales for eligible teaching and leadership roles do not have to meet the threshold. They include lead practitioners, leadership group members and those who are of unqualified and qualified status across local authority-maintained schools and academies.

Meanwhile, the government has more than doubled the minimum pay threshold for those looking to bring loved ones to the UK through the family visa route. It now stands at £38,700, up from £18,600.

Home Office officials told *Schools Week* a teacher exemption is also expected to

be included, but no confirmation or details of this were published as we went to press.

Last week, Stacey Singleton, the Department for Education's deputy director for ITT reform, revealed the department is trying to help teacher trainers deal with an influx of international applications.

Technical changes have meant overseas candidates "are only able to apply to courses that can offer visa sponsorship".

Ministers have missed secondary teacher recruitment targets for all but one of the past ten years. Last year, they fell 40 per cent short.

NEWS: RECRUITMENT

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many early in their careers.”
In a comment, a DfE spokesperson did not touch on the missed targets, focusing only on the few subjects where recruitment had seen a boost, including biology and computing.

They even hailed recruitment in physics, where the proportion of required teachers hired rose by just 1 percentage point in the past year. The target was missed by 83 per cent.

Targets were only met in classics and PE, for where almost double the number of the required teachers were recruited, and history, where 119 per cent of the teachers needed were hired.

James Noble-Rogers, chief executive of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, said the figures made for “sorry reading”.

“They mean that schools, particularly secondary schools, will struggle to recruit the new teachers they need.”

North east worst hit

The number of new entrants to the profession fell by 10.2 per cent in the north east, 8.9 per cent in the north west and 7.4 per cent in London. However, new entrants were up 12.7 per cent in Yorkshire and the Humber and 0.1 per cent in the West Midlands.

Statistics show an increase in the proportion of older entrants to the

profession. This year, 10 per cent of entrants were over 40, compared to 9 per cent in 2022-23.

The rise is mostly driven by an increase in the proportion of entrants aged 50 to 54 – from 1 to 2 per cent – and reflect a growing older population more widely.

Graihagh Crawshaw-Sadler, chief executive of Now Teach, said the data showed a “cultural shift in the world of work and in teaching specifically... Rather than becoming Deliveroo drivers, older people are choosing to do something more meaningful”.

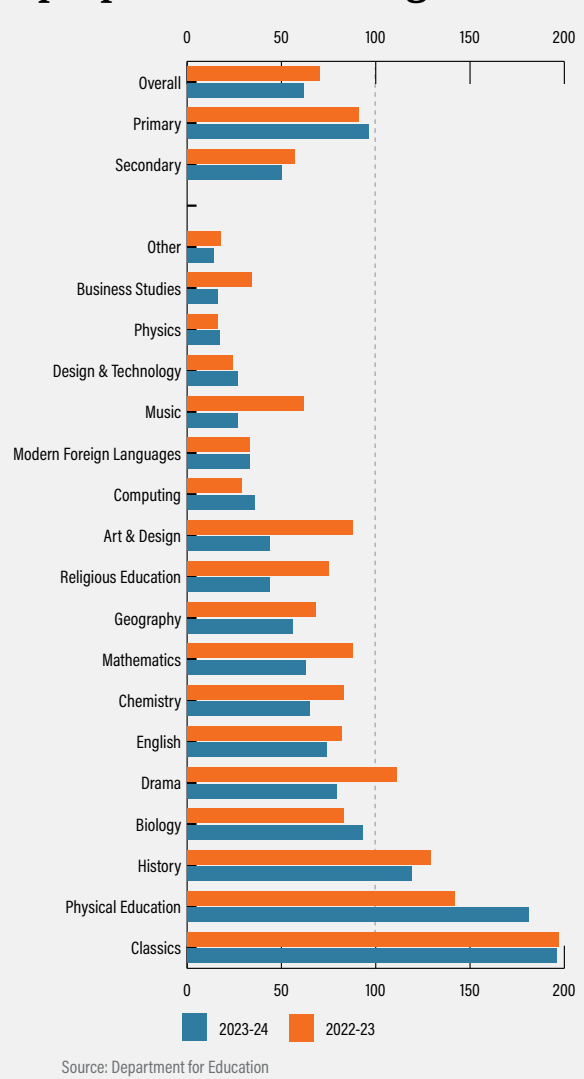
Worth has called for enhanced bursaries and others financial incentives, alongside reducing workload and improving the competitiveness of teachers’ pay”.

Noble-Rogers added ministers need “as a matter of urgency to bring together all relevant stakeholders to agree a cohesive and fully funded strategy to recruit and retain teachers”.

The DfE claimed it was “taking the long-term decisions to build up incentives, cut workload and increase the routes into the teaching profession”.

“We are boosting our recruitment incentives with special bonuses of up to £30,000 after-tax over the first five years of their career for those who teach key subjects.”

Enrolments to ITT in England as a proportion of the target (%)



[VIEW THE FULL ITT REPORT HERE](#)

AMY WALKER | @AMYRWALKER

Keegan attempting to ‘frustrate’ pay scheme, says union

NASUWT, the teachers’ union, has launched a new dispute with the government – accusing Gillian Keegan of “seeking to delay the pay review” process.

The row has erupted amid claims the education secretary has attempted to “frustrate the statutory scheme” by failing to send a remit letter to the School Teachers’ Review Body “in a timely manner”. The document is sent to the STRB every year and asks it to make its recommendations for teachers’ pay and conditions the following May.

Keegan wrote to the independent body last November, a month earlier than her

predecessors Nadhim Zahawi and Sir Gavin Williamson in 2021 and 2020.

But despite promising in July to “streamline” the STRB process to stop decisions on wages from being left until the end of summer, Keegan still has not sent 2024’s remit letter.

NASUWT said this “places in jeopardy the ability of the pay review body process to be concluded in an appropriate timeframe”.

Dr Patrick Roach, the union’s general secretary, accused Keegan of “deliberately interfering in the pay review process”, adding it was “plain for all to see the utter contempt” the government has for the teaching

profession.

The government has been repeatedly criticised for leaving decisions about pay until the end of the summer term each year, after schools have already drawn up their budgets.

The education secretary told a webinar during the summer she understood “the timing of the STRB process and the budgeting process is, let’s just say not ideal... I can understand and feel your pain”.

A DfE spokesperson said: “We are committed to the independent pay review body process and we will always carefully consider the operation of the pay round on any given year.”

Schools to get advice on selling off land to fund vital rebuilds

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

Leaders will be issued with guidance on selling-off surplus school land in a bid to “unlock potential in the education estate” and fund vital rebuilds.

LocatED, the Department for Education’s property company, is set to publish the advice in the coming weeks, as *Schools Week* analysis shows land disposals have fallen to a four-year low.

The government-backed firm also hopes to roll-out building projects that will see rundown inner-city schools operate within newly constructed blocks of flats.

But Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said: “We’ve surely reached the bottom of the funding barrel when schools are being advised to sell off land in order to pay for capital projects.”

LocatED revealed last year it had been asked to assess 316 school sites with surplus land.

A Freedom of Information response last month showed the firm has been commissioned to undertake analysis of 132 more plots. Of these, five were considered worthy of further consideration.

Efforts to sell-off surplus school land for housing were ramped up in 2019 and the instruction to review hundreds of sites represented a big escalation.

Despite this, government figures show only eight disposals of school land had been given the government greenlight between January and August 2023.

When extrapolated across the whole year, the number stands at 12. The figure is a drop-off from last year’s 20 and is the lowest since 2019 (11).

The LocatED spokesperson said they work with the Department for Education to identify “where the team is able to work with school landowners to unlock potential in the education estate”.



“With this in mind, LocatED has produced a document that will help school landowners navigate the process of developing school land in order to release capital for reinvestment in the school estate. This is due for publication in the next few weeks.”

Officials recently completed feasibility studies on bankrolling the redevelopment of St James Hatcham Primary in south London through the creation of 100 homes.

Speaking at last month’s Schools and Academies Show, LocatED associate director Will Attlee explained the current site has “£1 million of condition need and not much chance of getting the money” otherwise.

“It’s in that classic band where it’s pretty bad, but not so bad it’s falling down and that it will qualify for DfE funding,” he said. “What we’ve done is put together a scheme that will rebuild that school on the existing site ... [and is] fully funded by the development of around 100 new homes. This is clearly something that works in city centres, but not everywhere.”

St James Hatcham’s sports hall is earmarked for space across the block’s

ground floor, while classrooms will be located on the level above. Affordable housing will be spread across the building’s upper floors.

Attlee noted the building’s footprint “will be reduced, even though the actual floor area is maintained”. This is expected to leave “additional outdoor area for the pupils to use”.

A LocatED spokesperson confirmed its teams are “assessing next steps in light of current market conditions”. However, the firm believes “there is potential for this type of development across other sites in city centre locations”.

“There are a lot of one-form-entry schools that are on one- to two-acre sites,” Attlee argued. “They’re a class of 1960s post-war buildings [and] they’ve probably got significant condition need.”

LocatED also oversaw the sale of one of St John Fisher Catholic Comprehensive’s two former sites in Chatham, Kent, for £3.85 million.

The school, which operated across two buildings in separate locations, moved to a new base in the spring, after being selected for redevelopment through the

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

NEWS: SCHOOL BUILDINGS

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Geoff Barton

government's priority school building programme in 2014.

Funds raised through the deal – which completed earlier this year – were handed back to DfE “as a contribution towards the cost of delivering the new” facility.

“This has delivered 100 new homes and brought [in] £4 million,” Attlee said, adding that schools are responsible for 125,000 acres, which “puts us in the top 10 landowners in the country”.

Despite this, the wider “property world ... [doesn't] think of education as something they need to think about seriously” and there remains “a lot of inefficient use” of the estate.

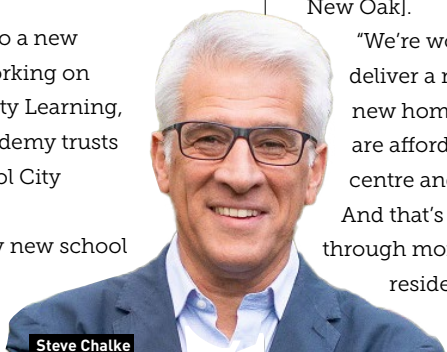
But Barton said the scheme “feels like a tacit admission” that current capital funding is “totally inadequate and that schools and colleges are going to have to rely on the random chance that they may have some land that it might be possible to sell”.

The government estimates its backlog of school repairs totals £11.4 billion.

James Bowen, assistant general secretary of school leaders' union NAHT, added “very few” schools have surplus land, and that parents “will be pretty unimpressed to discover that schools are being encouraged to consider this”.

But Attlee pointed to a new project LocatED is working on with Oasis Community Learning, one of the largest academy trusts in England, and Bristol City Council.

“You have one fairly new school



Steve Chalke



CGIs produced ahead of the St John Fisher rebuild

built in 2012 [Oasis Academy John Williams] and a typical 1960s primary school that has significant condition need [Oasis Academy New Oak].

“We’re working with the trust to deliver a new masterplan with 350 new homes – [of which] 30 per cent are affordable – a new children’s centre and a new primary school. And that’s all going to be fully funded through money raised from the residential [plan].”

Oasis founder Steve Chalke said the scheme would give him the opportunity to secure a larger primary school equipped with special educational needs provision. The current site “leaks heat, is tired [and] past its sell-by date” and Bristol also has a “housing crisis”, he added.

The development is earmarked for more than 20 acres of fields, deemed “surplus to requirements” by the DfE, that pupils do not use and “half of which is muddy”. But “nothing has been decided yet”.

ANALYSIS: PISA

PISA: Tories claim reform victory after maths rise, but fears over inflated scores

SCHOOLSWEEK REPORTER
@SCHOOLSWEEK

England's secondary school pupils have risen up the international rankings for their attainment in maths, but there has been little comparable improvement in reading and science.

And this year's landmark Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results are also likely to overinflate scores for England as too few schools took part in the study.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published its PISA league tables, comparing countries across the globe on their youngsters' attainment in maths, reading and science, on Tuesday.

The government has previously said that this year's PISA results should be used to judge the success of former education secretary Michael Gove's sweeping reforms.

So, what have we learned?

1. England's pupils weather Covid-19 shock better than others

The average performance in maths and reading has "significantly declined" across OECD countries since 2018 – revealing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

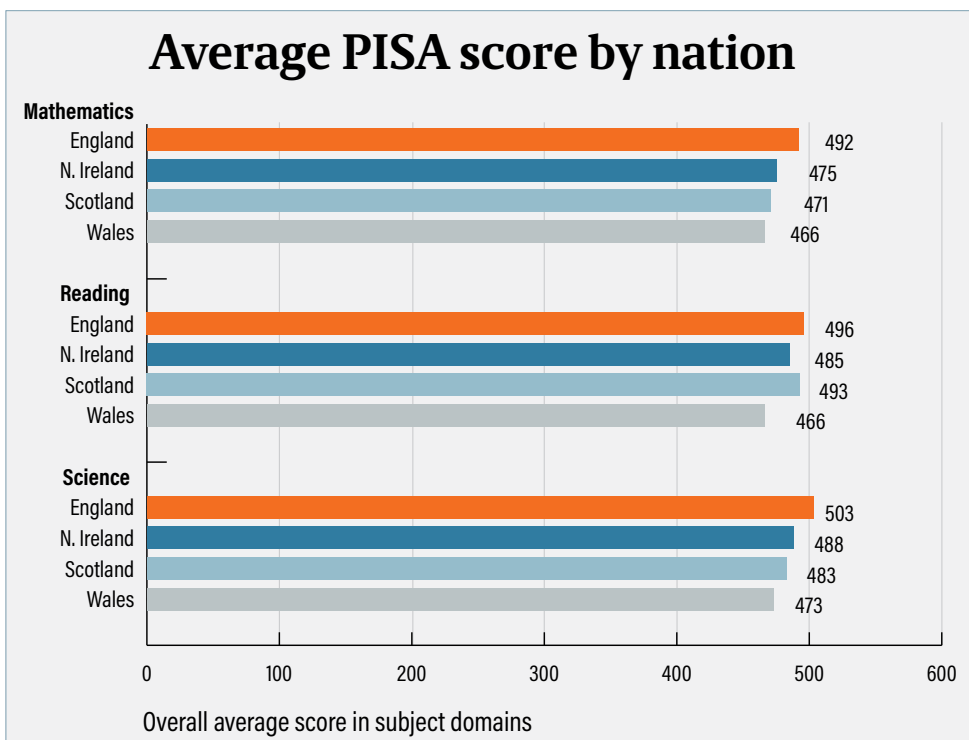
While England's performance also "declined significantly", it remained "significantly above" average in both areas.

It meant the country rose to 11th in the world, out of 81 that took part, and up from 17th in 2018. This is up from 27th in 2009. England ranked 13th for both reading and science, little change from the 14th and 13th respectively in 2018.

Overall, England's performance in 2022 was similar to previous PISA cycles between 2006 and 2015. However, the country's scores were "significantly" higher for all subjects in Northern Ireland and Wales, and much higher for both maths and science in Scotland.

2. Tory politicians declare reform victory

Nick Gibb, who served three stints as schools minister between 2010 and this year, unsurprisingly claimed the results showed



the "phenomenal success" of the government's "evidence-led" reforms.

The rankings are a big improvement from 2009, the year before Labour left office, when England was 27th for maths, 25th for reading and 16th for science.

Education policy experts have pointed to England performing "significantly" better in all subjects than Wales this year, and much better than Scotland in maths and science, as evidence

the approach works.

Reforms in both Scotland and Wales have followed a more progressive approach to education.

Education secretary Gillian Keegan said the results are a "testament to our incredible teachers" and "the government's unrelenting drive to raise school standards over the past 13 years".

She pointed to the PIRLS results this year

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

ANALYSIS: PISA

which ranked the country’s primary pupils as fourth best in the world for reading, adding: “England is now firmly cemented as one of the top-performing countries for education in the western world.”

3. But academics sound conclusion caution

Drawing conclusions from PISA results is perilous at the best of times. But this year, about one in three schools and one in four pupils refused to take part in the study – meaning that England’s response rate fell below the sample standards.

This mean that “higher performing pupils may be overrepresented” and England’s results could be seven or eight points higher than they should be.

England was not alone: other countries, including the United States and China, fell below the standards. However, the OECD makes no adjustments to the scores when such standards are not met.

But eight points is the difference between England and some countries in the group that “scored significantly lower than England” in maths and reading.

University of Oxford researchers, who put together the report into England’s results, concluded that “caution is required when interpreting the analysis” as the sample “may not be entirely representative”.

The fall-out from Covid-19 has impacted the ability of the results to act as an accurate barometer, too – as most countries, including England, saw their performance drop this year. Changes could be more down to differences in how countries handled the pandemic.

Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, added PISA “should not be used for cheap political point-scoring, to justify a narrowing of the curriculum or to denigrate the work of schools in any UK jurisdiction”.

4. England also among the most equitable

PISA also scored countries on what it describes as “equity”: how well disadvantaged pupils perform relative to their better-off counterparts.

The results show the United Kingdom is one of 10 countries considered to be “highly equitable”, meaning they “have achieved high levels of socio-economic



Gillian Keegan



The PISA scores on the doors:

In **maths**: English pupils’ average score was scored **492**, *significantly above* the 472 OECD average – although lower than the 504 in 2018. Just eight countries had significantly better scores.

In **reading**: the average score was **496**, *significantly above* the average of 476 but lower than the 505 in 2018. England’s score was similar to between 2006 and 2015, while the OECD trend average declined.

In **science**: the average score was **503**, *significantly higher* than the 485 OECD average – and just two points lower than in 2018. However, this marks a continued downward trend in science, falling from 512 in 2015.

For context: The mean performance across all OECD countries fell by 10 points in reading and by almost 15 points in maths.

fairness together with a large share of all 15-year-olds with basic proficiency in mathematics, reading and science”.

In England, the point differences in performance in maths, reading and science were 85, 82 and 92 respectively, all lower than the OECD averages of 92, 93 and 96 respectively, but not “statistically different”.

Schools minister Damian Hinds said the results show “good reason for optimism about education in England and the prospects of getting that disadvantaged gap closing once again”. But he added: “We are far from being able to say the job is done and even more so with the disruption dealt by Covid.”

5. But science continues long-term decline

While England has risen up the ranks for maths and reading since 2012, scores in science have continued to fall steadily.

Amanda Spielman, the outgoing Ofsted chief inspector highlighted the ditching of key stage 2 science tests and key stage 3 exams, along with subject-level inspection.

“So the intersection of those policies created, I think, a significant de-emphasis of science relative to reading and maths, possibly also other parts of the curriculum,” she said. “So really thinking about how the strategic levers in the system create the right incentives for the whole curriculum, not just for the tremendously

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

ANALYSIS: PISA

important reading and maths, but that there is more to education.”

But John Jerrim, professor of education and social statistics at University College London, said the broader evidence suggests science is “holding up pretty well. We remain above international average, the fall observed in PISA is not observed in other data sources and a similar trend can be observed in other countries.”

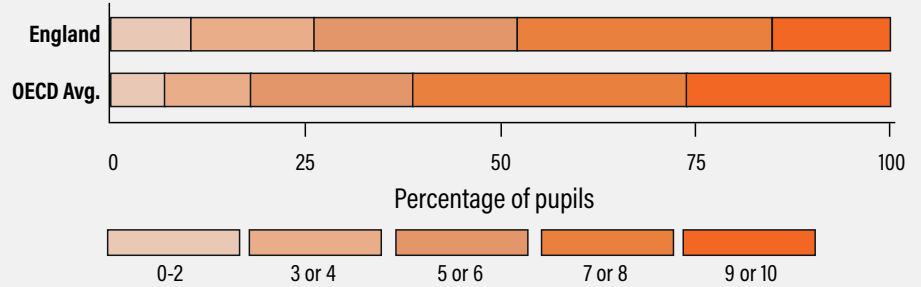
6. And English pupils are really not happy

About half of pupils in England (48 per cent) rated their overall life satisfaction as 7 or more (out of 10), compared to 61 per cent across other countries. This meant English pupils reported statistically significantly lower overall levels of life satisfaction (6.01) than the 6.75 average. It’s also falling: in 2018, English pupils had an average score of 6.1. However, the fall globally has been bigger, down from 7.

The Education Policy Institute said the UK now has the “second lowest average life satisfaction of 15-year-olds across all OECD countries”.

Pupils who reported being happy with life had

Self reported overall life satisfaction score of pupils in England and on average across OECD countries



the highest average score in maths, significantly higher than others.

7. Staffing shortages a bigger barrier to teaching

Staffing shortages were the top barrier to teaching across the OECD, but England is faring worse.

More than half of pupils (54 per cent) were in schools where headteachers reported a lack of staff was affecting teaching – compared to a 47 per

cent OECD average.

The government has missed its secondary teacher recruitment targets for nine of the past ten years. It is also expected to fall short of recruitment for this year, with figures out this week.

However, 80 per cent of pupils were in schools where the headteacher reported that either inadequate or poorly qualified teaching staff had very little or no impact on teaching.

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'When you're hungry you can't learn': Reports highlight pupil poverty rise

JACK DYSON

@JACKDYDS

Politicians are being urged to focus on combatting wider societal issues after two global reports revealed worrying child poverty levels in England.

This year's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) league tables showed about one in 10 youngsters skipped meals at least once a week because they didn't have enough money. This is on par with countries such as Mexico and Moldova, and above the OECD average of 8.2 per cent.

A Unicef study, also published this week, found UK child poverty levels have leapt by about 20 per cent between 2012 and 2021.

Despite this, England's overall PISA attainment scores have held up better than other countries'.

However, Loic Menzies, the Centre for Education and Youth's former CEO, added: "The million-dollar question is: how good would those results be looking if we were prioritising other aspects of young people's lives? If schools were just concentrating on education, then they'd be able to do so much more. We should be aware of the weight of responsibility this puts on them."

PISA compared countries across the globe on their youngsters' attainment in maths, reading and science. Results for most countries fell after the Covid-19 pandemic, but England's held up better in maths – seeing the country rise to 11th in the world out of 81 that took part.

However, the food poverty findings show the government has "completely under-prioritised all the other dimensions of childhood", added Menzies. He pointed to benefits caps introduced six years ago that would restrict tax credits and universal credit support to two children per family, which he said "punished young people for their parents' fertility".

As part of the PISA research, children were asked how often they did not eat because there was not enough money to buy food in the past month. About 5 per cent answered "every day or almost every day", while a further 5 per cent said between once and five times a week.

Figures for the whole of the UK (10.5 per cent) were worse than those reported in Serbia, Mexico,



Moldova and Brazil.

Alfonso Echazarra, an analyst at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which runs PISA, said the numbers are "actually a relatively large proportion for an OECD country".

"We always have to bear in mind that this information comes from students," he added. "But it's incredibly relevant and it's very policy-relevant because it's something that, you know, countries and government can do a lot to solve."

Speaking on Tuesday, children's commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza threw her weight behind the breakfast club model, noting: "When you're hungry you can't learn."

Many schools already provide breakfast clubs, either from their own budgets or with food provided through the government's national school breakfast scheme.

De Souza said: "We've got truly disadvantaged groups now, like asylum seeking children and children whose families are falling into poverty even though they're working. And we really need to rocket booster support for them to enable them to engage with education. So, I applaud the breakfast club model."

Labour committed last year to providing free school breakfast clubs for all primary school pupils if it wins the next election, at a cost of £365 million. Bridget Phillipson, the shadow education secretary, announced that the "fully funded" scheme would be rolled-out

to every primary school in England. She said it would be the "first step on the road to a modern childcare system", and would "drive up standards in maths, reading, and writing" while also taking pressure off parents.

Meanwhile, Unicef's newly published report, entitled "Child poverty in the midst of wealth", stated "many more" UK youngsters "lived in poor households in 2021 than a decade earlier".

Child income poverty rates among many minority ethnic groups – Bangladeshi, black, Chinese, "mixed", Pakistani and "other" – "are more than twice as high" than for those defined as white British.

The UK's 20 per cent increase in child poverty was the largest among high-income and upper middle-income countries in the EU and the OECD.

"The UK and Hungary both reduced their expenditure on child and family benefits relative to the size of their economies and child populations," the Unicef report read. "Engrained experiences of poverty throughout childhood can be associated with particularly negative outcomes for children, exacerbating the disadvantages that poverty already creates."

The charity's "report card 18", a ranking of countries based on their latest child income poverty levels and the proportional change in that rate, graded the UK third from bottom, only ahead of Turkey and Colombia.

The Department for Education has been approached for comment.



Bridget Phillipson

Government contractors signed off on unsafe £45m schools

FREDDIE WHITTAKER & AMY WALKER

@SCHOOLSWEEK

EXCLUSIVE

Government contractors signed-off on three school building projects costing £45 million that will now be demolished and rebuilt over safety concerns.

Sir Frederick Gibberd College, in Essex, Haygrove School, Somerset, and Buckton Fields Primary School, Northampton, will all be rebuilt after surveys found they could not withstand “very high winds or significant snowfall”. Two opened in 2020 and the third in 2021.

The schools were told in August to close their almost-new buildings constructed by Caledonian Modular.

Closures meant a staggered start to term at the schools, with some pupils being temporarily transferred to other school sites.

Gillian Keegan, the education secretary, told MPs this week the projects were “signed-off by both building control and technical advisers, which obviously is something that we’ll be looking at further”.

The DfE later confirmed to *Schools Week* that the technical advisers were its own contractors. Building control must be signed off either by a local authority or approved private contractor. It is unclear which did so in this case.

Tim Warneford, a school building consultant, said the DfE’s advisers “appear to have been asleep on the job”.

“Of course mistakes get made, but if you pick them up early enough you can address them.

There are serious questions to be asked about the



quality-assurance process.”

Keegan told the Commons Education Committee the issues “should have been discovered by whoever signed-off that building”. She also pledged to “fund the rebuilding of those three schools and we will seek redress from the company who has done a poor job”.

Caledonian Modular went into administration last year. While Susan Acland-Hood, the DfE’s permanent secretary, said it would be “harder against a company that’s gone into administration”, the department will “look really hard at other ways to identify those people”.

Since the three schools were built, the DfE has introduced a new construction framework, which requires firms to appoint a “clerk of works” to carry out further building inspections on behalf of the DfE before sign-off.

Acland-Hood said the DfE had also “gone round and had another look at what we could have done, because again, there’s deep discomfort that this has happened, but particularly as you say, the building control sign-off and the technical adviser sign-off is really concerning”.

The projects used so-called “modern methods of construction”, in particular a modular building approach where elements are built off-site and then assembled.

Acland-Hood defended the approach during the committee hearing this week: “We don’t think that this is about the fact that it was modular. It’s a workmanship problem about how the modules were connected together, rather than a failing in the modules, if that makes sense.

“So, a key thing is that we’ve got the checks going on to make sure that the quality of the workmanship is where it needs to be. It doesn’t raise a question about all modern methods of construction buildings. It is very specific to this company.”

Contracts worth £38 million for the Sir Frederick Gibberd and Haygrove buildings were awarded to Caledonian Modular in 2019 under the DfE’s £3 billion “modern methods of construction” framework.

Under its contract, Caledonian Modular – which went into administration in March 2022 – led design, planning and installation of the schools. The firm was also awarded a £6.5 million contract for building works at Buckton Fields.

Documents filed by administrators on Companies House show the DfE was owed £2 million when Caledonian Modular collapsed. But there were “insufficient funds” to cover unsecured creditors, which included the DfE.

“We are also reviewing our contracts and seeking legal advice on how we can recover the costs where that contractor was involved,” said academies minister Baroness Barran.

AMY WALKER | @AMYWALKER

Keegan: No RAAC removal deadline until new year

The government won’t confirm its deadline to rid every school of crumbling RAAC until the new year, Gillian Keegan has said.

The education secretary said she would not give a “definitive date” until mitigations to make every school safe were complete.

Ministers and officials have scrambled to respond to the growing crumbling concrete crisis in schools since changing guidance just days before the beginning of the autumn term. An updated list, published on Wednesday, shows the presence of the concrete has been confirmed at 231 schools and colleges.

The government has pledged to rebuild all schools “that need it”, but has repeatedly

refused to set a deadline for removing RAAC from the school estate entirely. This is despite pressure from the Commons Public Accounts Committee, which called in November for the education department to announce a funding package and deadline, like their NHS counterparts.

Addressing the Parliamentary Education Committee this week, Keegan said her “first objective I have is to make every school safe”.

Work to shore up dangerous school buildings has involved building hardwood structures or steel beams below RAAC to prevent collapse. Keegan said she hoped such works would be complete “in the very near future”.

A panel of experts is then sorting schools into “two groups”: those that will receive grant funding to remove RAAC and those that will be fully or partially rebuilt.

Keegan said she understood schools were “keen to understand where they are and we’ll be issuing that [information] as soon as possible. We will be able to give you a definitive date when all schools are safe from RAAC because that was my very first objective.”

Pressed by MPs, Keegan said this would be “very shortly”, but not before Christmas, calling the expected announcement a “new year present”.

Influencer scheme could go national to tackle absence

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOOTH

A scheme using “local influencers” to share “positive messages” on attendance as part of a government communications push could be rolled out nationwide.

The Department for Education published its response to the education select committee's report on persistent absence on Thursday.

While ministers outlined several plans to combat stubbornly high absence, committee chair Robin Walker said: “Outstanding questions remain about whether the education and health systems are sufficiently resourced to meet the rising tide of demand for SEND and mental health services.”

Mandatory attendance data ‘no sooner’ than September

The DfE has been piloting a daily attendance data collection, which scrapes schools’ registers to give real-time intel. Four in five schools already take part.

MPs urged the DfE to make use of the dashboard mandatory “as soon as possible”. However, this should be “subject to a successful evaluation of the pilot and addressing any remaining concerns about data management”.

In its response, the DfE said it intends “to introduce regulations to mandate participation no sooner than September 2024”. But this is subject to work with the DfE’s Star Chamber Scrutiny Board, the Information Commissioner’s Office and the schools sector, “as well as the usual parliamentary procedures”.

Mental health attendance code snubbed

MPs said introducing an authorised mental health absence code for schools to report “could eliminate the need for medical evidence in cases of known and established mental health difficulties, and reduce the need for intervention via prosecution”.

Previous schools minister Nick Gibb has already poured cold water on the idea. The DfE’s statement added: “There are concerns that creating an additional code is unhelpful in practice and could place a burden on schools. This is because, at the point of taking the register, it would be difficult for the teacher to determine



whether an absence due to illness was related to a mental health reason or a physical health reason, or a combination of the two.”

MPs recommended a “cross-government assessment of the scale” of pupils’ mental health difficulties. But DfE said they do not believe it’s necessary as the government “already funds work to monitor” this.

Influencers called on for attendance campaign

MPs called for a “targeted public information campaign” on when or when not to send unwell children to school.

The DfE confirmed that, with a creative agency, it has launched a regional “paid-for comms campaign in two locations”, focusing on “disseminating positive messages on attendance” and offering “clear guidance on mild illness/anxiety”.

“The channels for communication spread across radio, static media, social media and local influencers. The department will work with the local authorities and schools in the regions in order to maximise visibility of the materials while the campaign is running.”

If the regional campaign is successful, the DfE will “seek to roll this out” nationally in January.

Schools Week revealed how the Cabinet Office paid £13,000 for two influencers to promote its back-to-school campaign during the pandemic.

Ministers mull collecting breakfast or holiday club data

MPs said councils should be required to report on school attendance levels for pupils who have attended a breakfast or holiday club.

DfE said it is working with several councils to use pseudonymised pupil-level data to track holiday activities and food (HAF) programme attendance. It will “further investigate what more local authorities can do to collect and report” on the effect of HAF on school attendance. But there could be data sharing issues, they said.

The DfE said it will also investigate with the delivery partner of the national school breakfast programme how it can collect attendance data directly from schools taking part.

Attendance Action Alliance minutes, published this week, revealed the DfE is looking at multi-academy trust-level data to “further understand at what level attendance can be improved”.

New sections SEND and local authority service guidance

The committee called for statutory attendance guidance from September 2024.

In response, the DfE said it agrees its “working together to improve school attendance” guidance should become statutory in recognition “of the attendance challenge and to ensure that local authorities and schools consistently meet the expectations”.

The guidance will be updated ahead of this, it added, and it will include “new sections on mental health and targeting support meetings, and updated sections on SEND and LA services that can be traded”. However, no timescale was given.



Robin Walker

Schools sound warning over vapes laced with drugs

AMY WALKER

@AMYRWALKER



Growing numbers of schools and councils are issuing warnings over pupils vaping class B drugs, as the devices continue to cause widespread disruption to the education sector.

The concerns follow reports that pupils from at least two schools have been rushed to hospital after inhaling vapes laced with THC – the main psychoactive component in cannabis – this year.

Honywood School, in Essex, became the latest to send a letter to parents, after becoming aware that some of its pupils “have been able to access and use this substance”.

Councils, including Middlesbrough, Hampshire and Brighton, have also issued guidance in recent months on the potential effects of such substances being vaped by young people.

A survey of 4,000 members published by teachers' union NASUWT in October found 85 per cent believed vaping was a problem on school premises, with three-quarters saying the issue had grown over the past year.

Comments on their experiences included that students were “vaping THC and being sick, passing out and being high whilst on school premises”, and that there had been an “escalation from vaping nicotine to THC”.

Honywood headteacher James Saunders said, like many secondary schools, it had been forced to “run a pretty tight ship” in terms of monitoring vaping among pupils since Covid.

The school has trialled a vape detector and places pupils caught with a device in isolation. “We’ve managed to kind of contain it and keep a lot of it out of school, but that doesn’t mean it’s eradicated,” said Saunders.

A recent incident in which a child was suspected of using a vape containing THC posed another challenge because the substance is “pretty odourless... whereas the others have fancy smells so you could smell if someone has done it”.

Pupils caught in possession of illegal substances are permanently excluded, while the school is “constantly in communication” with police, said Saunders. However, he warned that while the incident was the first he’d come across, “I think it’s going to start emerging as a bigger thing”. And while vaping itself could be disruptive to the school day, “that’s got more serious consequences

because people could end up in hospital”.

In May, Burnley Unity College confirmed three of its secondary students were taken to hospital after smoking a vape suspected of containing THC. Headteacher Jane Richardson said at the time that it was working with Lancashire Police, Trading Standards, the UK Health Security Agency and local safeguarding partners to “keep our children safe”.

According to reports, two pupils at Saddleworth School in Greater Manchester ended up in A&E in September after being given a vape on a school bus suspected of containing THC.

Both schools were contacted for comment.

Glyn Potts, headteacher of Newman RC College, in Oldham, said he first became aware of disposable vapes being “repurposed” after a 13-year-old male pupil collapsed in July last year. The boy, who Potts said had taken a vaping device from his older brother, took the “largest inhalation he could have done” before he got off the school bus and was taken to hospital. He added that other schools in the area had experienced similar incidents with devices that have “cracks in the plastic” and had been “broken into”.

A “response system” now exists in Oldham, whereby if a pupil collapses “we can confiscate the vape, we can give it to the police, who will make a decision about whether it ... needs to be tested”.

Greater Manchester Police said it shared information and was working with partner agencies and Trading Standards to tackle illegal vapes.

Potts said he was “concerned” about the 3 per cent of pupils he estimates are using illicit vapes, but added that while they may come in reporting that they “feel unwell”, much of the issue was happening outside the school gates.

While Newman is investing in a fireproof box for storing illicit vapes that are also “prone to exploding”, it has only confiscated six vapes this academic year, none of which contained class Bs.

Middlesbrough Council issued a warning to parents in October after Cleveland Police seized “dozens of vapes” confiscated from students by a school in the area.

The force found that a small number tested positive for class B substances, which the council said could cause “serious health problems”.

Brighton & Hove Council said in July that the “rapid rise of vaping among children and young people, including the use of cheaper illicit and unregulated vapes, is extremely concerning”.

In the same month, while announcing a crackdown on teen vaping – which included renewing vaping prevention programmes with schools – Hampshire County Council pointed to illegal products on the market that may contain THC.

The government has set out proposals for cracking down on underage vaping and carried out a call for evidence.

Pupils “should be taught the facts about legal and illegal harmful substances” in RSHE lessons, a Department for Education spokesperson said.



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Long read

JESSICA HILL | @JESSJANEHILL

'Someone's got to do it, so we're doing it'

The number of pupils with mental health issues is soaring, leading to increased absences and wider health and educational problems. So schools are developing their own strategies to cope, Jessica Hill reports

Schools are swapping English and maths for lessons in wellbeing, running interventions akin to those used for drug addicts and setting up "zen dens" to tackle pupils' worsening mental health and get them back into the schools.

One in four parents cited anxiety or mental health problems as a reason why their child was absent from school, according to a Department for Education parent and pupil panel survey undertaken in June. This is up from just 8 per cent in February 2022.

Heads told Schools Week that the cost-of-living crisis, social media bullying, family breakdown, the Covid legacy and climate change fears were all causing more of their pupils to express feelings of anxiety.

With long waiting lists for mental health

services, and only around a third of schools covered by the government's mental health support teams, Schools Week has looked at the way schools are stepping up to meet the challenge.

Signing attendance contracts

Mahatma Gandhi and his non-violent resistance movement provided the unlikely inspiration for Oasis Community Learning's new approach to non-attendance. Jon Needham, director of safeguarding for the 54-school trust, says it sets up "family interventions" in the style of those intended for drug and alcohol addicts.

"Parents tell their young person, 'I love you, but I'm not going to tolerate this anymore,'" he says. "Kids sign contracts" for a 10-week programme committing to improve attendance and behaviour.

"It's a massive opportunity to change these

family's lives," adds Needham. "If we can support parents to be more in control – for parents to parent rather than try to be their kids' best friend – then you get structure. A kid with structure is more likely to cope, and then more likely to attend."

The programme also brings parents together in WhatsApp communities to support each other, after the trust found "lonely parents who didn't realise that [many others were] struggling with the same thing".

Providing support to families, as well as their pupils, is a common theme.

The London South East Academies Trust, which has nine schools mostly for pupils with social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH) needs, has family liaison officers who visit them at home to understand the barriers to their attendance.

Long read: Mental health

Sometimes their tasks include driving pupils into school, adds deputy chief executive Neil Miller. “Ultimately, whatever it takes.”

Creating calming spaces

But, as more pupils are displaying heightened educational needs, schools are under pressure to become more inclusive – rather than relying on costly external provision.

Many are establishing separate spaces outside of the classroom for pupils to learn, or simply escape to feel less anxious, sometimes called a nurture hub, SEMH zone or “zen den”.

Anna Smee, managing director of Thrive, which helps schools to develop strategies for pupil wellbeing, says it is something that all schools can offer.

“It could involve a large outdoor area with a focus on nature, a quiet corner in a classroom with something soft to sit on and books, or mindfulness activities on hand to promote relaxation,” she adds.

Last summer, Honiton Primary School in Devon built a 40-foot timber and canvas yurt for its SEMH support. It includes a canteen kitchen and fire pit. Headteacher Christopher Tribble describes it as “a breakout space for peace and calm, assemblies and storytelling” in the “lovely forest” grounds.

He says the yurt was inspired by “the success we had using the outdoors style of life to get through Covid”, when “being in our woods and in tents really helped the staff and children”.

Sometimes it can just be the little things. Heartwood CE VC Primary and Nursery School, in Norfolk, uses soft and natural lighting where possible.

Many of its displays use neutral colours rather than the “garish” ones previously on display, said the school’s Thrive lead, higher level teaching assistant Sophie Watson.

The school tries to embed a sense of belonging. There is a wooden dolls house in a corridor, in which all pupils



‘A kid with structure is more likely to cope’

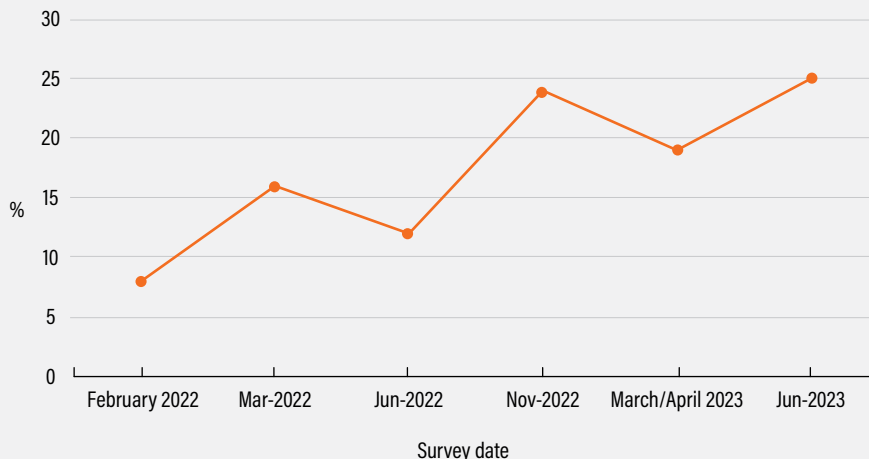
have made wooden peg dolls of themselves. “They can see themselves in there and know that they are part of the Heartwood family.”

In his latest book, leading education policy thinker Doug Lemov writes: “It is possible to combat the effects of the pandemic, the epidemic

[of rising screen time and social media] and the rising tide of mistrust that our students are facing, and to help them feel and sense of belonging in their school.”

Pupils as mental health champions

How anxiety/mental health has risen as the reason for pupils not attending school



Source: DfE’s parent, pupil and learner panel surveys: Share of parents citing their child’s anxiety/mental health as the reason why they had not attended school every weekday for the last two weeks

Anna Smee

Long read: Mental health



Forest yurt

Three out of five parents of children who missed school because of a mental health issue said the problem was a “general feeling of anxiety or anxiousness not specifically attached to any one thing”. Schools and councils are surveying their pupils to understand what the issues are, before seeking a solution.

A survey of almost 13,000 year 11 pupils by UCL and the Sutton Trust last year found more than half of teenage girls are suffering from poor mental health. Almost a quarter said they had self-harmed in the past year while one in 10 said they had attempted suicide.

A survey of more than 70,000 pupils by Edurio found the problem is getting worse. The proportion of girls saying they felt “well” fell from 43 per cent in 2020-21 to 31 per cent last year. Scores for boys fell from 54 per cent to 46 per cent over the same period.

Camden has put on workshops in body image and self-esteem in response to surveys of pupils showing this was a growing issue in the borough. It also trained 133 pupils from 10 schools to become wellbeing champions, supporting peers with poor mental health.

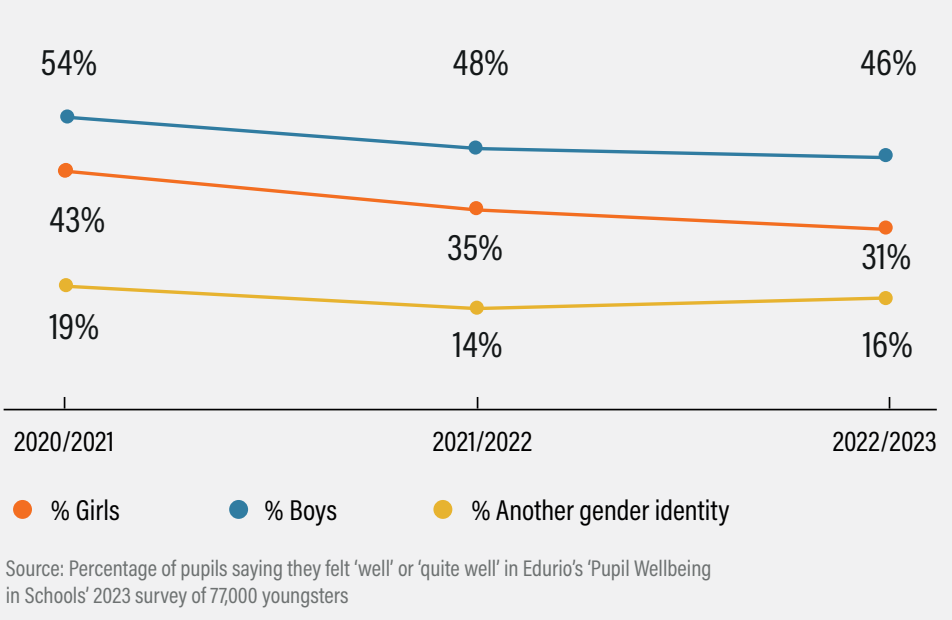
A survey of parents, students and staff by academy trust E-Act found youngsters were “feeling isolated and alienated” due to “fractured families”, according to regional executive headteacher for the West Midlands Michelle Scott. This was “compounded by a lack of aspirations, because they can’t see a way out”.

Every school must now sign up at least two staff for whole-trust training



Christopher Tribble

Girls’ already problematic mental health is worsening



‘Adversity is going to happen, so we try to reframe it’

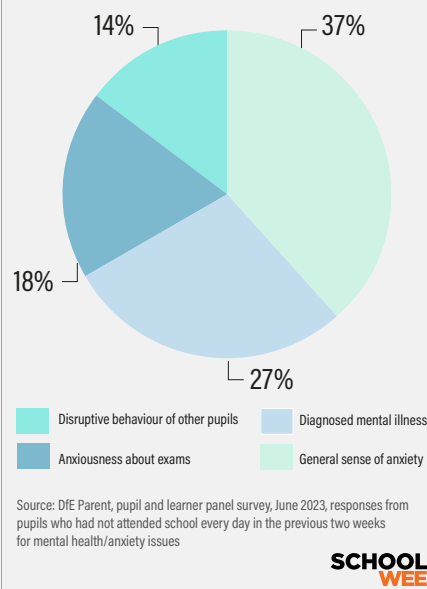
in mental health throughout the year. But Scott says it is “a little easier” to find support in big cities like Birmingham, where many of its schools are based and more specialist groups are available.

The trust worked with one group focused on “toxic masculinity”, which helped pupils considered to be potential targets for gangs. It was “supporting anxieties in the context that these pupils live in” which was “really powerful for those kids. But those groups don’t exist everywhere, and the quality is very varied,” says Scott.

Early findings from a government study indicate a “causal link between mental health problems and absence” from school, according to minutes from the October meeting of the national Attendance Action Alliance.

Russell Viner, the Department for Education’s chief scientific advisor who is leading the study, says a “calm, safe and supportive school environment is important for increasing

Pupils reasons for the anxiety/mental health problems keeping them off school



confidence and attendance”.

More specialist boots on the ground

Government-funded mental health support teams, launched in 2018, have reached only a third of pupils while just 58 per cent of schools have staff who have undergone the senior mental health lead training, promised to all schools by 2025.

Long read: Mental health

But almost half of the mental health leads say they lack time to provide the required support on top of their day jobs. Where budgets stretch, schools and trusts are hiring their own specialists.

Oasis is spending £1 million a year on employing 13 mental health workers. Needham says the team is “improving the quality of referrals to CAMHS services, because young people have already started therapy while they wait for their assessment.

“A lot of stuff – anxiety, bereavement, self-harm – is no longer being addressed by CAMHS services. Somebody’s got to do it, so we’re doing it.”

Similarly, the Harris Federation of 55 schools in and around London has its own central mental health team of four councillors and a senior practitioner. But, because “everybody wants people trained in mental health work ... finding specialists was really difficult”, says chief executive Dan Moynihan.

That fact is reflected in the number of roles on the jobs site Indeed relating to children’s mental health in the UK, which jumped by 72 per cent from September 2021 to 2023.

While larger trusts may find cash to fund such teams, many others cannot. A survey of more than 1,000 school staff last year found fewer than a quarter had been able to access regular specialist mental health support for pupils.

Brookvale Groby Learning Campus, in Leicestershire, trained staff to become emotional literacy support assistants – using part of its recovery premium funding to employ a mindfulness coach. The coach works on wellbeing with pupils and staff who are feeling anxious and the initiative has received positive feedback.

Swapping maths for wellbeing lessons

While personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) studies have always involved educating pupils about mental health, some schools are putting the issue front and centre.

Kensington Primary School designed a new curriculum which headteacher Ben Levinson says “goes much broader and deeper in teaching children to understand their emotions,



Kensington Primary School

Ben Levinson

and strategies to deal with them”.

That has meant teaching fewer hours of English and maths (which normally takes up 60 to 70 per cent of primary timetables) to allow more time for wellbeing lessons.

Kensington’s pupils also wear trainers and tracksuits throughout the day so they can take part in “active learning breaks”. The sporty uniform also reduces the time taken to get changed after PE lessons – the focus of which is “much more about being physically fit than learning to play hockey or tennis”.

“There’s no point in children getting great academic qualifications if ultimately they’re destined to drop out because they mentally cannot cope,” says Levinson, who is also chair of the WellSchools network of almost 2,000 schools.

“When we look at children who find learning challenging, so often it’s a mental health problem driven by anxiety and lack of confidence.”

Claire Garnett, head of Juniper Hill Primary School in Buckinghamshire, was moved to write a life skills curriculum after



seeing a year six pupil “lose a third of her body weight” with anxiety. Pupils now get weekly lessons in life skills using 12 themes, exploring “the opportunities of adversity”.

Garett says the school, which has a play therapist and plans to open an SEMH hub next year, tries to “create a culture in which it’s OK to have a wobble”.

She says “Adversity is going to happen, so we try to reframe it to make things positive. We’ve got to normalise some of the stuff that’s making people anxious, because this is life.”



Dan Moynihan

Opinion

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COP28: Sustainability in education 2023



BARONESS BARRAN

Minister for the school system and student finance

The UK is continuing to lead the world on climate education

Baroness Barran sets out how UK education is leading the way at COP28 and how government will ensure it continues to do so

Last week, I joined children from Ark Tindal Primary Academy in Birmingham who are members of their school's eco council. As they showed me round polytunnels and vegetable patches, I saw how they have transformed their inner-city playground into a sanctuary of biodiversity. It was inspiring to see how young people are caring for and improving the environment around them.

Children and young people are focused on climate change and its impact. They want to know more about how it is affecting them now and how it will do so in the future. This is as true in Birmingham as it is for children around the world and it is clear that collaborating with our international partners is crucial.

That's why today, I am attending the education day at COP28 in Dubai – sharing experiences, views and expertise with education leaders from around the world.

We will work together to develop national education strategies to address climate risk and build more resilient education systems.

Ahead of COP28, I am proud that the UK was one of the founding partners and signatories of an education ministerial declaration, in partnership with UNESCO and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). This declaration aims to secure political buy-in from a host of countries across the world as signatories pledge to move the education and climate change agenda from dialogue to action. We have already signed up 26 countries, with more signing up at COP28.

This is by no means the first time the department for education has made an important contribution to COP. In 2021, we hosted the first international environment and education ministers' summit at COP26, and in 2022 we launched the Greening Education Partnership at COP27 to take action to tackle climate change through education.

And while international collaboration is essential, so too is action on a local scale.



COP28 UAE

“ To empower young people, we need great leaders

This autumn, we launched the National Education Nature Park, an ambitious nationwide project to empower young people to make a positive difference to their immediate environment, learn about nature and improve the biodiversity of the school estate.

The National Education Nature Park is a key part of our sustainability and climate change strategy, which sets out our approach to climate education, aiming for England to be the world-leading education sector in sustainability and climate change by 2030. The strategy was developed in collaboration with young people, ensuring they are at the centre of our approach.

To empower young people to take positive action on the environment, we need great education leaders. In May this year, we published guidance on sustainability

leadership in education. The guidance will support education settings in identifying areas to take action and in considering how to prioritise the steps they take.

Next year, we are taking the next step by rolling out a free programme of support to help the sector implement their own climate action plans. This includes a digital support hub, coordinated regional support and access to risk and emissions data. This programme will bring together action on climate education, green skills and careers, decarbonisation, adaptation and biodiversity.

I am heartened by the work already happening in education around climate and sustainability. I am looking forward to sharing this progress, and learning from our international partners at COP28 as we work together to develop the climate leaders of the future.

Opinion

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JACK WORTH

School Workforce Lead at NFER

These dire figures call for urgent action on recruitment and retention

Recruitment has all but collapsed and government must act swiftly to make teaching more attractive, writes Jack Worth

Today's dire teacher training recruitment data confirms teacher supply is a critical issue facing England's education system.

Physics recruitment of just 17 per cent of the target numbers will grab the headlines, along with secondary recruitment at half-of-target, an unprecedentedly low level. But it is the huge extent and near-universal set of shortfalls that should concern policymakers.

Fifteen out of 18 secondary subjects failing to meet recruitment targets means it is a full crisis of teacher supply, and not just a challenge confined to the usual suspect subjects. Primary recruitment is the lowest it has been for more than a decade, though this is somewhat mitigated by the diminishing need for quite so many primary trainees due to falling pupil numbers.

What are the main drivers?

Teacher supply is a multi-faceted issue and it's possible to place too much emphasis on recruitment having a shortfall, when retaining more teachers would mean lower targets.

But this data points to recruitment being significantly more challenging

than it was before the pandemic. Overall trainee numbers are 24 per cent lower than they were in 2019 and lower even than the previously unseen lows in 2022.

Part of this is explained by the surprisingly resilient state of the wider labour market. Despite high interest rates, cost-of-living pressures and talk of recession, job vacancies have remained plentiful in the labour market. In contrast to the economic woes of the pandemic leading to a surge in teacher training applicants, the strong post-pandemic labour market has provided stiff competition for teaching.

But these recruitment woes don't suggest that bursaries are failing. Quite the opposite: subjects with a bursary increase saw enrolments rise by 19 per cent compared to last year, while those with no change saw enrolments fall by 18 per cent. Our recent evaluation of bursaries underlines that while bursaries and other financial incentives are no panacea, recruitment would be an awful lot worse without them.

Is it all about recruitment?

Of course, the health of teacher supply is not just a recruitment issue. If we retained more teachers, then the targets would not be so high. Because of trainee drop-out and attrition after qualification, every seven more teachers we retain means we would need to recruit 10 fewer teachers into training.



“Improving teaching's attractiveness is essential and urgent”

Reducing workload, improving working conditions and raising pay competitiveness would all help to improve the overall teacher supply situation.

Another key aspect of recruitment shortfalls is a technical change to the way ITT targets have been calculated since 2020. Despite leaving rates in 2022 being similar to their level in 2019, the secondary target is now 30 per cent higher. The new target methodology represents an overall improvement on its predecessor, as it now accounts for the cumulative impact of previous under-recruitment.

But it also conceals some of the underlying recruitment trends. For example, physics recruitment has fallen from 42 per cent of target just before the pandemic to 17 per cent this year. Physics remains a cause for great concern, but the actual number recruited is only eight per cent lower than before the pandemic.

What should the policy response be?

Despite some of the key drivers being economic forces beyond its control, the government needs to take urgent and radical action to improve the attractiveness of teaching as a

profession to enter and remain in.

Policymakers should be aiming to put teaching in a position where it is attractive enough to persuade graduates to enter regardless of what is happening more widely. This recruitment data suggests teaching may be drifting further away from that position, with pay not competitive enough and a lack of flexibility being exposed as a key competitive weakness in a graduate labour market newly transformed by hybrid working.

Enhancing bursaries and other financial incentives and reducing workload are likely to help. The wider labour market weakening may also support better recruitment next year.

Increasing teachers' pay would also likely improve both recruitment and retention and is a key lever within the government's direct and timely control. However, pay needs to be rising faster than average earnings to increase competitiveness.

Improving the attractiveness of the teaching profession is an essential and urgent need now to ensure the quality of pupils' education is not further compromised by growing staff shortages.

Opinion

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MATTHEW TATE

Headteacher,
Hartsdown Academy

Re-prioritising data in Ofsted inspections is a backwards step

At the risk of “annoying successful headteachers”, Matthew Tate uses his school as a case study to show why the inspection framework is getting the big calls right

It was with great frustration and some anger that I read an article in these pages shortly after my school’s ‘good’ Ofsted judgment where fellow professionals – who in my view should know better – were happy to imply that the judgment must be wrong.

The basis for their assessment was simply that the GCSE outcomes were below national average. Former chief inspector Michael Wilshaw seems to agree with them. He recently said it was “ridiculous” that schools with low outcomes can gain a ‘good’ grading, adding that such results “annoy successful headteachers”. In both instances, the conclusion is that the current Ofsted framework is not fit for purpose. They are wrong, and my school proves it.

Hartsdown is a high school in a selective area. Our cohort is mainly white working-class with over 60 per cent on free school meals, around 15 per cent Slovakian Roma and an average reading age of seven on arrival. Our community is highly mobile, with only 71 per cent of our year 11s starting with

us in year 7. Around 20 per cent of our cohort are being supported by social services or early help.

When I became its headteacher in 2016, it was a broken school. It had played the accountability game and lost, and financial changes and a drop in rolls had finished the job. It was undersubscribed in every year group.

My primary questions were, “Is this school good enough for my child?” and “Would I be happy if my child had SEND or childhood traumas and got this level of support?” In 2016, my answer was “no” and my promise to parents was that I would make the changes required so that I could answer “yes”. With the support of Coastal Academies Trust, I began to make changes with a view to the school’s long-term future.

When Ofsted visited in 2018, the inspectors remarked from the start that our results (then in the bottom 10 per cent nationally) meant we were likely to be ‘inadequate’. But they genuinely wanted to come to a fair judgment. They met with some of our most challenging students, some of whom had been excluded from other schools.

They saw our mental health provision, our work with social services and the police and our efforts to ensure our children’s



“When I became its headteacher in 2016, it was a broken school

basic needs and safety are met, including 24/365 safeguarding support. The final judgment was well-evidenced and fair: we still needed to improve but we were rapidly moving in the right direction, and a traditional curriculum model would be unlikely to meet the needs of our students.

This encouraged us to be radical. We remodelled our curriculum, working with Cliftonville Primary School, an ‘outstanding’ school, to develop a new kind of key stage 3. Instead of 12 teachers a week, our pupils have one classroom for 20 hours a week with two main teachers – one for literacy-based subjects and one for numeracy-based subjects. The rest of their time is spent accessing our enrichment curriculum.

When Ofsted returned in 2021, our results had improved but were still poor. Under the previous framework, we would not have been able to achieve better than ‘requires improvement’. Under the new one, the team was as

challenging as before and equally concerned about our results, but a different approach led them to a different conclusion.

I could argue that subsequent results confirm that judgment. After all, this year we are the 11th most-improved mainstream school nationally. But it is ridiculous to judge a school primarily on data.

I like data. But, used properly, data drives questions rather than providing answers. Of course, results are crucial to pupils and should be part of the conversation. They are, however, are a poor proxy for how good a school is.

No one is surprised that a complex cardiac unit’s death rate is higher than a cottage hospital’s. So with schools serving vastly different constituencies.

Would I be happy for my child to attend Hartsdown? He does. He has moved from a local grammar school and he is thriving. An increasing number of the staff’s children also attend. What better endorsement of a good school could you wish for?

Opinion

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CHRISTINE STANSFIELD

CEO, Mowbray Education Trust

We must think beyond reform and prioritise belonging

Ofsted reform is sorely needed but our staff, pupils and families can't wait for the profession to heal itself before it heals them, writes Christine Stansfield

Ofsted's annual report has been met with mixed reviews across the sector. School leaders cannot deny that recruitment and retention challenges, pupil absenteeism, poor behaviour, low attainment and fractured school-parent relations are troubling schools across the country. Likewise, it seems unavoidable that Ofsted should accept that reasonable adjustments to its framework are necessary to account for this.

It is clear that the current system is not fit for purpose as the existing benchmarks are not realistic in this post-pandemic world of education. Without enough teachers to fill our classrooms, leaders cannot ensure the high-quality level of education that we would all expect.

In reality, schools are lucky to have a full team of permanent teachers, let alone outstanding ones, with many having to plug the gaps with temporary measures. We must have a framework that accounts for the systemic issues schools face beyond their control, while empowering schools to improve areas that are at their disposal.

The reshaping of these structures

remains up for debate, not least between Ofsted, unions, campaign groups and the Department for Education. However, as this fractious discussion continues, it is clear that it will take time to agree on and implement a suitable framework. In the meantime, there is an opportunity for schools to focus on tangible and sustainable solutions which address the issues raised by Ofsted.

For me, there is a golden thread that, if executed successfully, will address many of the challenges within education. We must go back to the beginning and ensure our pupils, staff and families feel a sense of belonging to their school community.

In this modern age of technology and, after a long period of isolation during the pandemic, this has been lost. Recreating a feeling of belonging, being valued and being seen is the foundation on which everything else is built.

Bringing pupils together

By making our pupils feel they belong, there are clear signs that their attendance will increase. With this comes the opportunity to improve behaviour. Over time, this will lead to stronger outcomes.

At Mowbray, we are creating that sense of belonging by ensuring that we are living by our values, giving staff time to connect with pupils and providing opportunities for



“Belonging is the foundation on which everything is built”

pupils to explore their passions beyond the curriculum. We are looking for active ways for schools to participate in meaningful and emotive events of local and national significance – ones where we all do the same acts, at the same time, creating a powerful sense of togetherness.

Although it is early days, this approach appears to be resonating. Already, attendance is improving.

Supporting staff to thrive

The concept of belonging is also essential to address the recruitment and retention crisis which affects many schools, including those in our trust. While pay is an issue across the sector, we are focusing on the elements that are more greatly within our control.

We provide clear pathways for progression, offering subscriptions to the national college, access to our aspiring leaders programme and our innovative immersion project to support headteachers moving into the trust. We also support staff wellbeing and provide trust networks to bring like-minded staff together to share best practice, helping to boost their self-fulfilment and satisfaction in working for us.

Raising expectations for families

For our families, belonging is equally important, especially in today's polarised world. The fractured relationship between parents and schools referenced in Ofsted's annual report is something we have witnessed over the past few years.

That is why, in July, I wrote to parents about the hostility our staff were facing and the respect we would expect moving forward. This was received positively, and we have seen a marked improvement in our family relations.

In such a polarised world, it is easy to pull back and feel we have to always say “yes” to parents, but we must not forget that we are the education experts and have a responsibility to protect our staff and a duty to our students as learners.

By appealing to families on a human level, we laid the groundwork for a transparent and trusted relationship, helping to create a greater sense of belonging. Of course, school events and good communication help with that too.

Ofsted or no Ofsted, sector unity and a sense of belonging in our communities are the first steps to bringing back schools from the brink and ensuring that we thrive once again.

Solutions

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LAURA HANKINS

SENDCO, Bromesberrow
St Mary's Primary School

How to ensure diverse texts are inclusive of pupils with SEND

Laura Hankins shares her top tips for ensuring school texts are varied in content and accessible to all

Just as children see through us when we are not being authentic, they also see through books which, though well-meaning, can be tokenistic in representation. Carelessly chosen texts will have no impact and it is important that children are both reflected in what they read and exposed to experiences they may never otherwise engage with.

It is great to feel unique, but ultimately human beings have an innate appetite to belong. Books can provide this if they are accessible, showing our value and all the things we can be. In that sense, they act as a mirror, but they also act as a window onto the world.

As teachers, we have a responsibility to build children's cultural capital, recognising that for some, their life experiences are not as rich as others. Some children will have an array of diverse texts in the home, with lots of wonderful book talk and life experiences to provide context. For others, we need to aspire to provide this.

No child in our school should look at the books on our shelves like Charlie Bucket looking into the sweetshop window, knowing there are a range of wonderful, diverse sweets on sale but that all these

mouth-watering experiences are reserved for others.

Sadly, the reality of straitened school budgets means teachers are often themselves left gazing through the window of an increasingly rich and diverse publishing sector. However, there are a number of ways in which schools can mitigate this and ensure every child in their care is able to sample texts that are appropriate, relevant and engaging to them. Doing so is a matter of equity.

Spoiled for choice

The internet has democratised literature – to an extent. Publishers

are much better able to share with us, thanks to their extensive use of social media. As a result, we now have a much better understanding of the diverse range of texts out there.

This is great, but at times it can feel a little overwhelming. They all look so good, but it does often leave us to make difficult choices.

The key is to put the needs of the children first. Here are five steps to ensure you make the right choices and that each text is as impactful as possible.

1. Teamwork makes the dream work

The first step will take time, but it is key. Choosing texts must become a team effort, involving teachers, teaching assistants, the English lead and SENDCo (and librarian, if you have one). This way, you can ensure that every decision is based on clear knowledge of the children, their needs and unique differences as well as the full range of texts on offer to meet these.

2. Make it happen on purpose

Good book choices and a diverse library do not happen by accident; it

is intentional and needs to be built with purpose, based around the needs of the children. This is about more than what the texts convey, but also how it is conveyed and accessed.

3. Make it easier on yourself

Many publishers and reading schemes have already created explicitly planned banks of diverse, online and hard-copy quality texts. These can be particularly useful to reduce workload. But do your research and ensure the texts are authentic and representative of your children and their needs.

4. Choose accessibility

Recent research has found that three times more teachers whose pupils had access to eBooks rated their school's culture of reading for pleasure as excellent. eBooks are not only cost-effective but brilliantly accessible, with inclusive features such as dyslexia-friendly backgrounds and read-to-me audio. They can be a powerful enabling tool.

5. Talk about it

A given, perhaps, but talking about the diversity, the inequality and the conflict you encounter in texts is how you will ultimately challenge thinking, stereotypes, fear, suspicion and prejudice.

Like every book lover, I love the feel and smell of a physical book in my hand. But I am a realist as well; not everyone has them or can afford them and, even if they could, not everyone can enjoy them. An inclusive library in 2024 must offer more.

“ An inclusive library in 2024 must offer more



[ENDNOTE] The National Literacy Trust and Pearson's report, *Using eBooks to support reading for pleasure in 2023*, is available here: go.pearson.com/nlt

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THE REVIEW

FROM EDTECH TO PEDTECH

Authors: Fiona Aubrey-Smith and Peter Twining

Publisher: Routledge

ISBN: 1032343494

Publication date: 29 August 2023

Reviewer: Terry Freedman, Freelance edtech writer and publisher

From EdTech to PedTech sets out to bridge the gap between knowing what works in terms of education technology and knowing how to make it work in the classroom. A worthy aim although, by definition, it assumes that the ultimate audience, by which I mean the headteacher, knows what works in the first place.

Those of us who have held responsibility for embedding digital technology across a school will all have tales of well-meaning management who, frankly, did not have a clue. I'm thinking in particular of headteachers passing decrees that, when they perambulate around the school, they expect to see every classroom with its computers, laptops or interactive whiteboards on, as if learning gains depended merely on screens being powered up.

Aubrey-Smith and Twining rightly point to the possible mismatch between a teacher's ostensible view of edtech pedagogy and their actual view. A good example of this was a sort of "spot the difference" piece which appeared when interactive whiteboards were flavour of the year.

A photograph on the left showed a 1950s teacher at a blackboard, while the right-hand picture featured a 21st-century teacher at a whiteboard. The underlying pedagogy in each case was the same, and no amount of controlling the device from the back of the room rather than the front would be sufficient to convince students otherwise.

This is an important matter to point out, or at least to be aware of. A teacher in a school I worked in demanded that I remove all the computers from a computer room and put

them on the students' desks so that he could have the lesson's worksheet displayed on each monitor. It was relatively easy to convince him that distributing paper copies of the worksheet would be less onerous while no less efficacious.

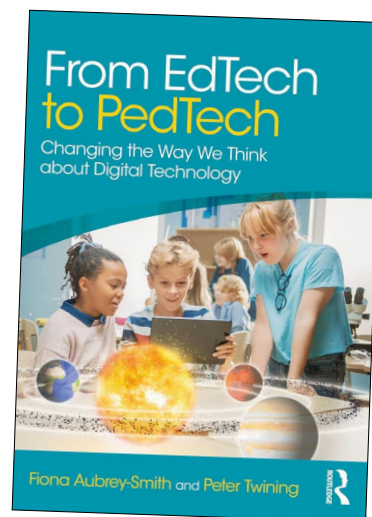
This is probably all very obvious, but one thing I was not aware of (at least consciously) is that teachers in different subjects tend to have different views and beliefs about what *is effective pedagogy*. I wonder if this is one of the reasons that almost every attempt to embed the old ICT (and English and maths come to think of it) across the curriculum failed.

As far as education technology is concerned, the key takeaway is that teachers tend to use technology in a way that aligns with their pedagogical beliefs. If, like the teacher I mentioned, you believe that your job is to impart a body of knowledge without undue contributions from students, no amount of technology will change what actually goes on in the classroom or the learning outcomes.

The book has several strengths, not the least of which is the breadth and depth of research, although I was surprised that the pioneering research carried out by Gobbo and Giradi over 20 years ago does not appear in the references. The book does mention the Hawthorne effect and refers to ecological validity (though not by name), yet it fails to mention the well-documented experimenter effect.

Nevertheless, there is plenty here to be getting on with. The summaries of different kinds of research, research terminology and pedagogical beliefs are excellent, and I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the "personas" were

BOOK
TV
FILM
RADIO
EVENT
RESOURCE



easily relatable to because often with this device the results are completely unconvincing.

I found the capitalisation of terms faintly irritating. When words and phrases such as "opportunities" and "pedagogical beliefs" are presented as "Opportunities" and "Pedagogical Beliefs" the effect is rather like reading something from the 16th century.

Still, as a set of tools (including downloadable templates) to help reveal to teachers what their underlying pedagogical beliefs are, the book is first-class. The suggestions and tools for team activities are very good and would make for excellent departmental meetings.

Far less attention is paid to whole-school policy but, as the authors say, they are not there to advise the senior leadership team. For teachers and middle leaders who are able and willing to invest the time, this volume should certainly help them to build their edtech use from first principles – if they are given the space.



Rating

A SEND-OFF TO 2023

Last week, Spotify subscribers received their list of top podcasts, songs, artists and genres for the past 12 months. The DfE's social media team quickly jumped on the trend with their own version, sharing what they felt their top achievements for 2023 were using the hashtag #SpotifyWrapped. Note the absence of any mention of the SEND and AP improvement plan published in March.



My own top three podcasts are *The Sleep Zone* podcast, *The SENDcast* and *Ofsted Talks*. Ofsted's has been going since 2021

and always makes for interesting listening. As a local authority inspector and adviser working in SEND, *he SENDcast* keeps me up to speed with all the big issues in the sector – of which there are many. And the *The Sleep Zone* really helps me unwind and rest after a busy day visiting schools – of which there are also plenty.

ALTERNATIVE INSPECTIONS

December is also the time when Ofsted looks back on its findings from the past year in its annual report. This year's – Amanda Spielman's last before stepping down as Ofsted's longest-serving chief inspector – seems to have come and gone with very little coverage despite some highly concerning facts about SEND and AP.



The Ofsted annual report states that we have seen a 19 per cent increase in children being educated in unregistered APs (up to 11,600). The problem was already bad enough for Ofsted to publish a blog about it in 2019, and to follow it up with one of its podcasts about it back in April 2022.

Now, as more and more children struggle in mainstream education, the number placed in independent and AP is set to grow faster than the state-funded sector. Yet Ofsted still has no power to investigate the quality of education in "illegal" settings.

A GROWING CONCERN

In another Ofsted blog this September, Steve Shaw, senior HMI for SEND and AP, shared the organisation's approach to inspecting the curriculum in alternative provision. He called for understanding that every AP setting is unique and therefore different approaches are used. This makes these provisions harder to inspect, particularly by inspectors with no experience leading APs.

In the introduction to the annual report, Spielman calls for us to be optimistic. "Imbuing children with optimism [...] is a worthwhile end in itself," she says, but adds that "optimism must be tempered by

realism". She goes on to single out that "high demand for special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and mental health services is particularly straining limited resources".

Many alternative provisions cater for children excluded from schools. As absenteeism and exclusion rates rise (in tandem with the number of schools rated 'good' or 'outstanding'), so is the number of AP placements, up 13 per cent from 59,900 at the beginning of 2022 to 67,600 at the beginning of 2023. A growing concern, not least because it appears Ofsted is not doing enough to stop the rise.

A CHANGE OF MOOD

Optimistic was how I felt when I put a call out for blog posts about the Ofsted report that I could use for this week's column. The SEND and AP community is usually quick to respond and happy to share, but responses were few. That is very unusual. The mood seems to have shifted as people tire of repeating the same things.

Helpfully, former headteacher John Cosgrove has used his blog to collate more than 200 entries of evidence to the select committee inquiry into Ofsted's work with schools that started in July 2023. A selection of these focus on inclusion and SEND, and surely provide the realism to temper any optimism within the inspectorate that 2024 will be an easier year for them.

I can highly recommend the *The Sleep Zone* podcast to anyone there who might be losing sleep about that.



Click the links to access the blogs and podcasts

The Knowledge

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



How concerned should we be about England's declining PISA science scores?

John Jerrim, professor of education and social statistics, IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society

What is most likely to grab headlines this week in response to the publication of the latest PISA results is that England's scores have dropped in both reading and mathematics. A lot of weight has been put on these – and especially the former – as evidence of the success of government policy (and indeed of the legacy of one minister in particular). But what caught my eye is the fall in our science scores.

Why?

Because it is hard to put it down to just the effect of the pandemic. While reading and mathematics scores have fallen this time around, this was after gains the last time, and not part of a broader trend.

The same cannot be said for science, with England's PISA score declining in this subject steadily since 2012 (see Figure 1). This finding was highlighted prominently by the OECD in its UK country note, where it said: "In science, the most recent PISA results are close to the results observed in 2018, but below those of any previous assessment *confirming a decade-long decline that began around 2012.*"

But how worried should we be by this apparent decline?

This decline has not happened in England alone

The first important point to note is that England is not alone in this decline in science scores. As Figure 2 below illustrates, the trend for England has mirrored the decline in the OECD average (the average across industrialised countries).

Now, as I have written previously, I think part of this apparent decline is methodological. When PISA moved from a paper to a computer-based assessment in 2015, there was evidence of a significant "mode effect" (the test being harder on computer than paper). Although the OECD tried to "correct" for this problem at the

time, in my view, it did not fully resolve this issue.

That is why we observed a seven-point decline in the OECD average between 2012 and 2015 (when the switch from paper to computer assessment took place). Interestingly, this led to a bigger decline in science than this time around – and thus apparently bigger than the effect of the pandemic (which does seem a bit odd).

All in all, it looks to me like England's fall is therefore likely to be due to factors affecting all countries (methodological changes to PISA and the pandemic) more than anything else.

Evidence from TIMSS

Whenever something interesting appears in one international assessment, I always look for whether there is consistent evidence from another.

TIMSS is another major international study that England has participated in for several years. And – although PISA gets all the media attention – an argument can be made for TIMSS providing more robust information about pupils' science skills.

Currently, TIMSS only provides information up to 2019, with the 2023 (and first post-pandemic) results coming in November or December next year.

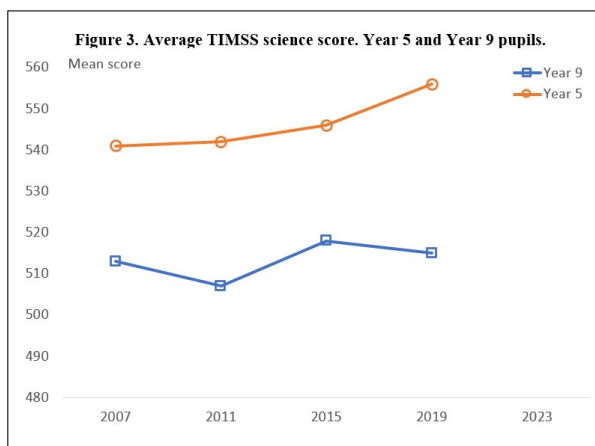
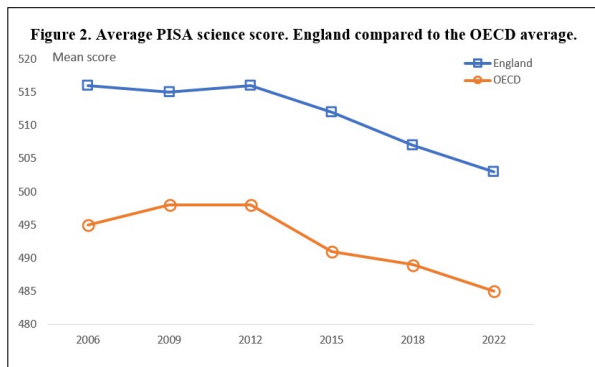
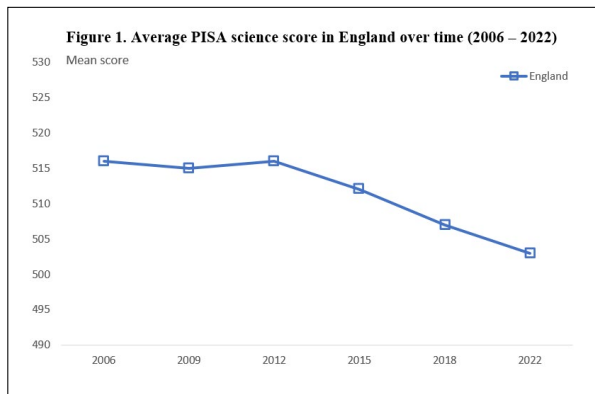
However, as Figure 3 illustrates, there is no evidence of any downward shift in England's TIMSS science scores. For year 5 pupils, there has actually been an increase over the past decade while, for year 9 pupils, scores have been completely flat.

It is therefore clear that the "decade-long decline" observed in PISA is not replicated in TIMSS.

Summing up

My guess is that, putting aside debates over political legacies, England's falling PISA science scores will generate a fair amount of attention among future-minded analysts and policy makers over the next few days.

However, the broader evidence suggests



that, in spite of all the challenges of the past decade – austerity, spending cuts, the pandemic and teacher strikes, to name a few – England's science performance is holding up pretty well.

We remain above the international average. The fall observed in PISA is not observed in other data sources and a similar trend can be observed in other countries.

So, what immediately grabbed my attention from the PISA results may not actually be that big a deal after all.

Week in

Westminster

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

FRIDAY

School trip day for new schools minister Damian Hinds.

Ministers often get flak for which schools they attend – normally it's criticism that they just visit academies and those based in and around London.

Well, none of that from Hinds. He travelled all the way to Worcester to visit two schools alongside the region's MP, one Robin Walker (fellow Conservative MP, former schools minister and now chair of the education committee).

TUESDAY

Anyone with a link to the Conservatives' education reforms of the past decade or so crept out the woodwork today to shower praise on its work, as the PISA tables showed England had, comparatively, performed quite well.

NB: PISA's league tables are riddled with issues at the best of times, but this year we were also told a sampling issue meant England's scores were much more generous than they should be.

Anyway, massive and totally unimportant caveat aside, the England results launch was a full-on Nick Gibb love-in. His successor, Hinds, even said Gibb is "the individual who I think is most associated" with Conservative education reforms enacted since 2010 (soz, Govey).

However, children's commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza went further, saying she wanted to "garland him with flowers" and "knight him".

Gibb is leaving Parliament at the next election and heading for the diplomatic service, so a knighthood is not out of the question. However, we suspect the palace may object to Dame Rachel doing the honours...



Gillian Keegan

WEDNESDAY

Players of Gillian Keegan bingo got a full house on Wednesday at the education committee.

The education secretary managed to mention Knowsley, degree apprenticeships, her experience in business and factories in a two-and-a-half-hour select committee marathon.

Your prize: a pat on the back for doing a "f***ing good job".

Also at the committee was Susan Acland-Hood, the DfE permanent secretary, who gave us more detail on what happened with the funding gaffe earlier this term.

"A large part of the detailed and complex calculation is double-run by analysts. The error occurred at a very early stage of the calculation, essentially in the input of pupil numbers. And the quality assurance scope was not broad enough to catch the whole of that. So essentially the double-running started with the same figures rather than going back and looking at the whole of the scope of that calculation."

Christmas bonuses all round!

P.S. Committee hearings are supposed to be an accountability route for MPs to get some actual answers from politicians over things – but this a good example of how it works.

When pressed about the dates for delivering on long-promised transgender guidance and a sex education curriculum review, Keegan admitted: "I'm not supposed to put dates out there."

Struggling to balance your books as costs rise faster than your funding? Well fear not – the DfE has launched a new "virtual assistant" to help academy trusts and auditors with their accounts submission cover sheet!

The DfE says it will give an "immediate answer" to the most common queries to "speed up the time to respond".

Unfortunately, it's a drop-down menu – and doesn't appear to include any questions relating to "we've run out of cash".

THURSDAY

The moment came for disgraced former prime minister Boris Johnson to give evidence at the Covid-19 inquiry this week.

School closures in January 2021 were "terrible" but "inevitable", he said. "So we were desperate to keep schools open. Did I fight and fight and fight in my heart and head to keep schools open? Yes I did and I really wanted to do it but it just wasn't a runner."

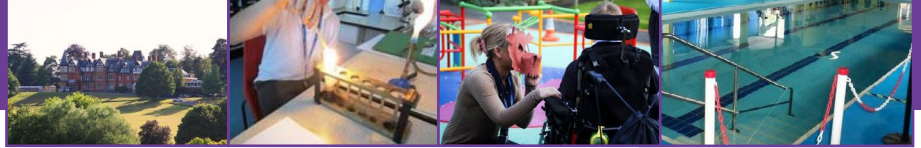
Hugo Keith KC, counsel to the inquiry, said former education secretary "Sir" Gavin Williamson wrote in his witness statement that he "didn't have complete autonomy to make core decisions, especially those regarding school closure and school reopening".

To which Johnson replied he "listened respectfully to what Gavin had to say and many, many colleagues who thought that we should try to keep schools open, and the fact is, sadly, schools are terrific reservoirs of the virus and in the cold winter months they were going to be a big vector of transmission for elderly people, and it wasn't a runner."

Awkward.



Boris Johnson



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The successful candidate will join and lead an experienced group of senior leaders and applications are welcome from colleagues with experience of a specialist or mainstream provision ready to take on a new challenge.

Please visit www.valenceschool.com
> **work for us** or contact HR
on **01959 567841** or
vacancies@valence.kent.sch.uk

Closing date: **7 January 2024**

Interview: **w/c 22 January 2024**

Valence School is committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of every student and we expect all our staff and volunteers to share this commitment. We value diversity and promote equality for all. References will be taken up before interview and online checks undertaken for shortlisted candidates. The successful applicant will require an enhanced DBS check (this post is subject to the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act).



Chief Finance and Operations Officer

We are seeking to appoint a Chief Finance and Operations Officer (CFOO) as part of the Central Trust Executive Team who will work in close collaboration with the Chief Executive Officer and Director of Education. The CFOO will provide financial and operational leadership, strategy, guidance and oversight to the Board of Trustees, Headteachers and other central Trust teams.

This is an ideal opportunity for a candidate who is committed to systems leadership and developing and empowering others with a logical and evidence-based approach.

The ideal candidate will have experience of leading at a senior level, overseeing a range of teams and areas. This is an exciting opportunity for a values based leader to use their expertise to make a real difference across our school communities.

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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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