SCHOOLS WEEK

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

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How private equity is making millions from 'bankrupt' SEND system

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DfE talks 'advanced BS' as schools fall apart

- Bankrupt councils mull cuts to school crossing patrols and uniform support
- Dozens of key government education pledges have failed to materialise
- RAAC schools face delays and uncertainty over funding claims
- But ministers obsess over qualification reform due to happen in...2033

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SCHOOLS WEEK Meet the news team

John Dickens
EDITOR
@JOHNDICKENSSW
JOHN.DICKENS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Freddie Whittaker
DEPUTY EDITOR
@FCDWHITTAKER
FREDDIE.WHITTAKER@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Samantha Booth
CHIEF REPORTER
@SAMANTHAJBOOTH
SAMANTHA.BOOTH@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Amy Walker
SENIOR REPORTER
@AMYRWALKER
AMY.WALKER@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

Jack Dyson
SENIOR REPORTER
@JACKYDYS
JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

JL Dutaut
COMMISSIONING EDITOR
@DUTAUT
JEAN-LOUISDUTAUT@LSECT.COM

Jessica Hill
INVESTIGATIONS AND FEATURES REPORTER
@JESSJANEHILL
JESSICA.HILL@LSECT.COM

Nicky Phillips
HEAD DESIGNER
@GELVETICA
NICKY.PHILLIPS@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Shane Mann
MANAGING DIRECTOR
@SHANERMANN
SHANE.MANN@LSECT.COM

THE TEAM Senior designer: Simon Kay | Classifieds Manager: Clare Halliday | Sales Executive: Tony Hudson | Operations and Finance Manager: Victoria Boyle | Event Manager: Frances Ogefere Dell | Senior Administrator: Evie Hayes | Office Administrator: Zoe Tuffin | Office Administrator – Apprentice: Sanchez Nandi

Don't make policies in haste

This week's paper details a litany of problems facing the schools community.

Councils that are effectively bankrupt are looking to education to find cuts (page 5). Schools affected by RAAC are struggling to claw back money from government (page 7). There's been another huge rise in SEND tribunals, and parents are winning in even greater numbers (page 8).

And yet, despite these pressing issues, ministers spent their time this week unveiling plans for an "Advanced British Standard" qualification.

That a ten-year reform is being announced by a government in its final throes suggests it's more of an election ploy than serious policy making. If it was so important, why didn't this government do it sooner, when they had time to actually implement the proposals.

Long-term reform of our education system needs proper, long-term consideration, not hastily-assembled policymaking that is meant to give the illusion that work is still going on, when in fact government is grinding to a halt.

Award-winning journalism

Schools Week journalists have been recognised at the British Journalism Awards for their cutting-edge investigative reporting.

Jessica Hill, our features and investigations reporter, scooped the award for "best built environment journalism" for her prescient and extensive coverage of the RAAC crisis in schools.

Samantha Booth, our chief reporter, was highly commended in the "best specialist journalism category" for her campaigning reporting exposing the crisis in the special educational needs system.

Hill's coverage brought to light an issue that has since become a full-blown crisis in schools, and one that ministers had sought to play down before being forced to order the last-minute closure of school buildings in the summer.

Judges said her win was a "reminder that sector specialist magazines can and should scoop the national media".

Most read online this week:

1 Ruth Perry: Schools can defer Ofsted inspections until 2024

2 Hinds: 'I was wrong' on teacher golden handcuffs

3 Ruth Perry: Ofsted delays inspections by a day for extra training

4 Schools sound warning over vaping devices laced with drugs

5 Re-prioritising data in inspections is a backwards step

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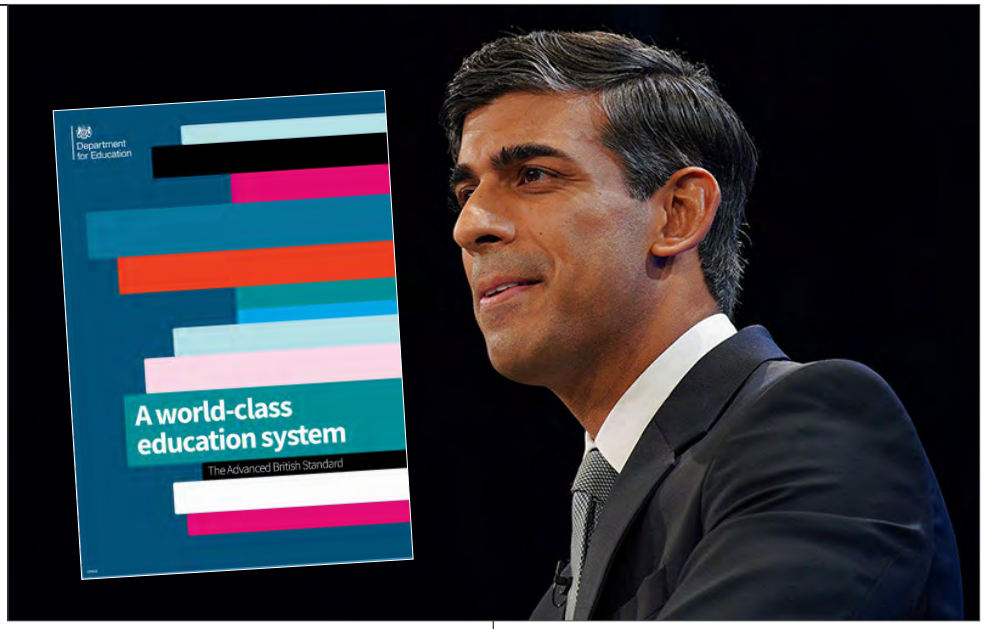
The lowdown on the ABS. But will it ever happen?

JOHN DICKENS
@JOHNDICKENSSW

The government is consulting on early proposals for a new Advanced British Standard qualification. Here's what you need to know ...



1. Remind me: what is the ABS again?

The ABS, or "advanced BS" as it has become known among edu policy nerds, would replace A-levels and T-levels with new "major" and "minor" subjects, including compulsory English and maths.

It would create a "simpler menu of high-quality options and expectations, for the first time breaking down the divide between 'academic' and 'technical' study".

The main aims are clearer post-16 options, more teaching time and ensuring pupils study a wider range of subjects.

However, it would take ten years to introduce – and is reliant on the Conservatives winning the next election.

Unions say it is "difficult to imagine a more pointless waste of energy and time", with Geoff Barton, head of the leaders' union ASCL, adding it is "headless chicken policymaking".

2. How the qualification would work

All 16 to 19-year-old pupils would take the ABS, studying a mixture of "major", "minor" and employability, enrichment and pastoral (EEP) activities.

They would have 1,475 guided learning hours, more than the current 1,280, over the two-year programme.

However, there would be an ABS and an ABS (occupational).

The first would be for most pupils working at level 3. It would entail a minimum of three majors (academic and technical subjects that directly support progression into employment or further study), two minors and some EEP.

The ABS (occupational) is for level 3 pupils who "are clear they want to specialise in one subject area", but they may have to do 1,725 hours because of industry placements.

They would study one "major" and one "double major" – both of which are subjects likely to be covered by the current T-levels or alternative academic qualifications (AAQs) – and do two "minors" in maths and English.

3. But what would the subjects look like?

There's not much more apart from broad principles, but the government says there will be no more "different qualifications offering similar versions of the same subject with overlapping content", for example a subject offered both as an A-level and AAQ.

Level 3 subjects should "provide stretch and challenge", be "suitably knowledge-rich", provide "levels of specialisation" appropriate for 16 to 19-year-olds and have "clearly distinct titles and content".

Majors will cover at least 90 per cent of the content covered by A-levels with between 300 and 350 guided learning hours (A-levels have 360 hours). Minors will have between 150 and 175 learning hours. Pupils will also do "at least 150 hours" of EEPs.

There will be more time with a teacher "to improve outcomes". Currently "we expect students to undertake a large amount of independent study, and also offer less time with a teacher", the consultation adds.

4. 'Difficult' for providers to offer 'full ABS suite'

A bigger breadth of 16 to 19 subjects means "it may be difficult for all providers to offer the full range of ABS subjects", the consultation adds.

But "as a minimum, our aim is for all young people to be able to access any of the ABS subjects at a provider within a reasonable travel distance of where they live.

"They should also be able to access a provider that offers the combination of subjects that will best support their chosen future pathway."

However this will "pose greater challenges in rural areas and other areas with fewer accessible providers" – a problem that has also beset the roll-out of T-levels.

5. Pupils to get ABS 'certificate of achievement'

Each major and minor will still have specific grades. But the favoured option is to have a "certificate or statement of achievement" for pupils achieving "the minimum attainment conditions".

This would "demonstrate" performance across the full programme, but while the certificate would note individual grades, it would not have an overall or aggregate score.

6. Nothing on finding more teachers

More teaching hours and compulsory maths and English will have "significant workforce implications", the consultation states.

The DfE has just missed its secondary school recruitment target for the tenth time in 11 years.

But the government says the consultation responses will "help us refine the design of the ABS, and in parallel, we will consider how best to step up recruitment and retention".

More details are promised in next year's ABS white paper.

TAKE PART IN THE CONSULTATION HERE

NEWS

Bust councils eye education budgets for savings

SAMANTHA BOOTH
@SAMANTHAJBOOTH

EXCLUSIVE

"Bankrupt" councils are proposing hikes to school catering fees, cuts to educational psychology costs and the replacement of school crossing patrol workers with volunteers.

Seven councils have issued section 114 notices – which mean they are unable to set a balanced budget – since 2020, with the Local Government Association (LGA) warning that 17 per cent of authorities think it is likely or very likely they will issue such a notice in 2024-25.

This week, Labour-run Nottingham City Council published proposals to address its £50 million budget gap for 2024-25, after issuing its section 114 report last month.

As part of plans to shave £1.2 million from its education budget it wants to reduce education psychology costs by "securing assessment at better value", which it estimates could save £25,000 over two years.

The authority is also looking to an annual increase in school catering fees to generate £150,000 in extra revenue.

Currently, families whose children are eligible for free school meals can access support with uniforms through the household support fund, which is due to close in March. If the grant is not extended, Nottingham's uniform support will "cease".

Transport costs covered by schools could also rise in 2024-25 in "line with inflation to ensure that the service continues to fully cover its costs".

Nottingham also plans to cover all of the costs of its welfare and virtual school teams from the dedicated schools grant, as long as it can get its schools forum to agree.

A final decision on the savings will be made at a full council meeting next year, so the proposals may change.

But Sheena Wheatley, the secretary of the National Education Union for Nottingham, said she was "very concerned about hidden cuts to schools' budgets" when they were under "immense financial stress".

For instance, she said schools could step in to fill the void if there were any further cuts to community services.

David Mellen, the council's leader, said proposals were for "significant savings and service reductions that no one would want to make".

But they "have to be considered by councillors if the council is to meet its legal requirement to set a balanced budget".

Conservative-controlled Thurrock Council in Essex proposed earlier this year to review school crossing patrols and "explore provision through the voluntary sector" for a saving of £45,000.

It is not clear if this went ahead as the council did not respond to requests for comment.

It issued a section 114 notice in December last year.

Birmingham City Council, which issued a notice in September, published plans to save £150 million ahead of setting a final budget next year.

The Labour-run council proposed cutting £57 million, a 13 per cent saving, from the children and families directorate, which includes education, early years, SEND and social care.

Schools Week reported in September that schools in the area were still waiting for their budgets after Birmingham splurged millions on a "disastrous" IT platform.

Geoff Barton, the general secretary of the school leaders' union ASCL, urged councils to do "everything they can" to avoid impacting schools, although the union recognised the problems originated in national government.

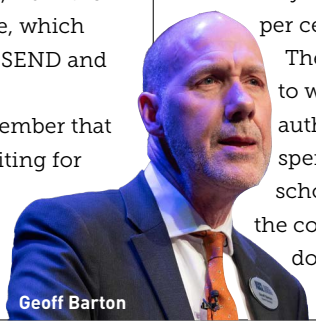
He said "everyone involved in education" was "doing their best" to protect provision for children and young people. "But it is inevitable that less money has an impact and that this will get worse unless there is action by central government to invest more in public services".

A survey by the LGA published last week found 7 per cent of chief executives or council leaders thought they were very or fairly likely to issue a section 114 notice in 2023-24.

This rose to 17 per cent when they were asked about 2024-25.

More than a quarter (29 per cent) of respondents were not very confident or not at all confident that their local authority would have enough funding to fulfil all of its statutory duties in 2023-24. This was 50 per cent for 2024-25.

The DfE said it would "continue to work with Nottingham local authority to ensure that their spending on the dedicated schools grant is compliant with the conditions of grant – just as we do with all local authorities".


Geoff Barton

ANALYSIS

Government 'not governing' as policies in limbo

SAMANTHA BOOTH
@SAMANTHAJBOOTH

EXCLUSIVE

Ministers have been accused of giving up on governing after a *Schools Week* investigation found at least 21 policies promised for this year have yet to materialise.

The wide-ranging commitments relate to some of the year's biggest policy reforms – including the SEND review and climate change action plan.

Kevin Courtney, the former joint general secretary of the National Education Union, said the government "talks in the future tense about things that are going to happen around the Advanced British Standard and more maths teachers, but it's failing [on] current pledges.

"It is not governing and education needs a general election to come sooner rather than later."

Our analysis identified at least 89 policies promised to either start or be delivered by or during this year.

The Department for Education said it was unable to verify whether all the policies had been delivered, advising us to submit a freedom of information request.

After a comprehensive search of public records and speaking to experts, we found 21 policies that have not yet been delivered, with just days left before schools break up.

We were unable to find confirmation of the delivery of another 46 policies – meaning the true figure could be higher.

We found evidence that just 21 had been delivered.

Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the school leaders' union NAHT, said the lack of progress "across a whole host of areas" showed a government that had consistently failed to prioritise education "despite sometimes warm words".

We estimate 26 pledges from the SEND and AP improvement plan were due to happen this year. At least seven look to be delayed, while six have been fulfilled.


Kevin Courtney

A public version of the new inclusion dashboards, to give parents improved transparency of local performance, has not launched. It was promised for autumn.

Likewise, non-statutory guidance on "outlining the full detail of the expectations" for new local SEND and AP partnerships has not surfaced.

Progress is not clear for 13 commitments, some of which are tied up in the reform-testing change programme.

Jo Hutchinson, the director for SEND at the Education Policy Institute, said schools and parents remained in the dark about the content of the new national standards.

Long-awaited guidance on transgender issues was due to be published this summer, but was pushed back to give the government "more time" to speak to teachers, parents, lawyers and other stakeholders.

Gillian Keegan, the education secretary, told MPs last week it would "hopefully" be published before Christmas, but it is still to appear.

The 2022 schools white paper said it expected all mainstream schools to work towards meeting the "expectation" of a 32.5 hour week by September 2023.

But this was delayed by a year over the summer. A cultural education plan was also meant to be published.

The DfE's climate strategy was due to consult on the content of the new natural history GCSE this year, but this will not happen until "early 2024".

"We've seen 10 different secretaries of state over the past 13 years, and a lack of clear, decisive action," said Whiteman.

"This lack of progress is mirrored when it comes to detailed policies that were supposed to help schools further improve the support and education they offer pupils – the absence of urgent action in fixing the broken, under-funded, SEND system is particularly regrettable."

A DfE spokesperson said: "This year has seen the department take school funding to its highest level in history, deliver the highest teacher pay award in 30 years, and publish groundbreaking reforms to provision for children with SEND, including announcing an increase in high-needs funding of 4.3 per cent for 2024-25.

"As ever, we want to deliver against all our commitments in a timely way, balancing this with business planning requirements, operational factors and a range of complex priorities."

The 2023 policy pledges still not met

1. Publish first SEND inclusion dashboards in autumn
2. Issue local SEND and AP partnership guidance in autumn
3. Announce new AP free schools in autumn
4. Publish consultation response to EHCP timescale review
5. Progress update from national SEND and AP implementation board
6. Set up expert group to help develop AP framework
7. Publish plan to increase primary attainment
8. Publish guidance on equal access and offering two hours of PE per week
9. Publish cultural education plan
10. Expectation of 32.5 hour week in schools
11. Launch pilot music progression fund
12. Consult on relationships, sex and health education review
13. Publish transgender guidance for schools in the summer
14. Consult on new natural history GCSE proposals
15. Publish framework to evaluate climate strategy impact
16. Develop primary science model curriculum
17. Start rolling out carbon literacy training for every school
18. Publish guidance on practical ways to reduce air pollution
19. Pilot new food curriculum
20. Pilot training for governors on a whole-school approach to food
21. Publish risk assessment of flood, overheating and water scarcity

NEWS: SCHOOL BUILDINGS

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RAAC schools wait (and wait) for refunds from DfE

JACK DYSON
@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

Leaders of schools affected by RAAC are facing long waits to be reimbursed hundreds of thousands of pounds spent on mitigations.

Trusts and councils were told earlier this year that the government would cover both capital and "reasonable" revenue costs incurred after they had to vacate buildings affected by the crumbly concrete.

Baroness Barran, the academies minister, told MPs earlier this year that the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) "normally" paid revenue claims "on a monthly basis, but if responsible bodies have cash-flow problems, we can do it faster".

But schools that scrambled to put plans in place after the emergency announcement to shut some buildings in August have reported delays and uncertainty in how their claims are processed.

Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust in the north east has so far spent more than £860,000 in attempts to ease disruption after the material was found in three of its academies.

The trust has received £55,000 back, relating to expenses in September, but has received nothing since.

Kingsdown special school in Southend, Essex, waited about eight weeks to receive £53,000 due from the Department for Education, prompting a complaint by its MP.

And in Yorkshire, Coast and Vale Learning Trust chiefs said they have been left in the dark by officials about how to claw back much of the £950,000 shelled out this term.

Nick Hurn, Bishop Wilkinson's chief executive, said: "When the DfE needs a response, we're asked to reply immediately. Unfortunately, it doesn't work the same way when the DfE is asked to respond.

"The problem with us is, because of the size of the amount, it has to get ministerial approval, which has slowed everything up. I understand that, but it's a tortuous process."

The trust spent more than £200,000 on transport, £190,000 on IT costs and about £130,000 on VAT for one of its schools to rent out space at a nearby college.

Government guidance for trusts and councils said the DfE would "provide funding for all mitigation works that are capital funded". Caseworkers would provide "the relevant form to complete".

It also said that "all reasonable requests" for additional help with costs – which include "transport ... or temporarily renting a local hall or office" – were expected to be approved.

But the advice said responsible bodies should discuss this with their caseworker and the ESFA "in the first instance to agree any further support needed".

During an education committee hearing last week Anna Firth, the MP for Southend West, asked education secretary Gillian Keegan to ensure the claims process "is light touch".

Keegan stressed each case "involves its own complexities" and that Kingsdown "is probably one of our most complex".

Louise Robinson, Kingsdown's headteacher, confirmed the school received the £53,000 last month, about eight weeks after it put in the claim. It has also received a further £100,000 from its academy trust in case future claims are delayed.

About two-thirds of Scalby School in Scarborough are now off-limits because of RAAC. Coast and Vale, which runs the secondary, has spent about £950,000 on capital and revenue costs since September, according to Michael McCluskie, its director of education.

"We've been assured that we'd have somewhere in the region of £23,000 coming back to us. Other schools have obviously been able to claim back some money, but at the moment we've not had any clarity over what that mechanism is.

"Our DfE partners tell us to keep a running tally of the costs and eventually we'll get something back."

Schools Week last month reported Sheffield City Council's concerns that it could be financially penalised for putting "children's safety first" and repairing the roof at Abbey Lane primary before the government committed to reimbursing costs.

The work began two months before ministers committed to fund refurbishment and rebuilding projects.

However, three other schools approached by *Schools Week* said they had not experienced any issues with reimbursements.

And Tony Ball, Essex County Council's cabinet member for education, whose authority area has more RAAC schools than any other, said the council, academy trusts and the DfE were "working well together to respond to the extent of the RAAC issues affecting Essex schools".

A DfE spokesperson said it would "spend whatever it takes to keep children safe in school".

"We have provided additional revenue funding to date to Bishop Wilkinson ... and are considering further reimbursement requests. We are processing reimbursement requests to Kingsdown School and Coast and Vale Learning Trust as quickly as possible."

Baroness Barran

NEWS

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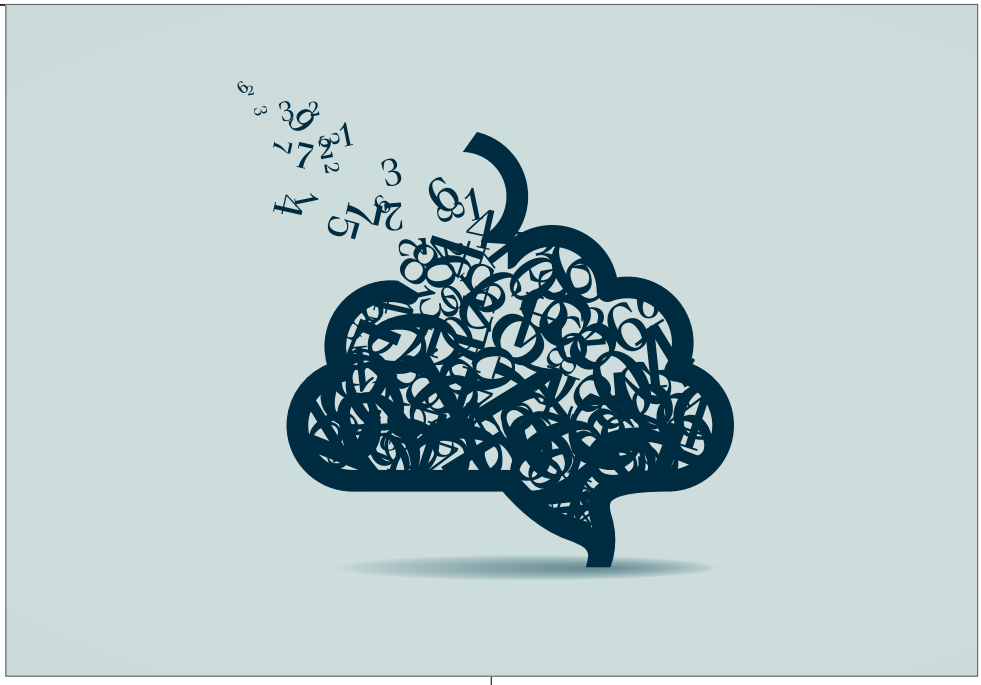
Five snippets from this year's festive data dump

SCHOOLS WEEK REPORTER
@SCHOOLSWEEK

The government this week once again blessed us all with its pre-Christmas data dump.

Official statistics about tutoring, school absence fines, SEND tribunals and exam cheating and appeals were all published on Thursday morning, and almost none of it is good news.

Here's what we learned...



1. SEND tribunals rise again, as nearly all parents win

The number of parents launching tribunal appeals over local authority refusals to provide SEND support for their child has risen by nearly 25 per cent to another record high.

And 98.3 per cent of parents won their appeals – the highest since records started in 2011-12.

Data published by the Ministry of Justice this week shows 13,658 appeals were registered in the 2022-23 academic year, a rise of 23.5 per cent from 2021-22 when registered appeals rose to 11,052, topping 10,000 for the first time.

Schools Week revealed earlier this year that a backlog of cases has left parents of vulnerable children waiting nearly a year to challenge decisions on SEND support.

2. Quarter of schools shun tutoring

Just 70.8 per cent of schools used the catch-up scheme last academic year, down from 87.4 per cent in the year before.

And just 45.5 per cent of tutoring reached disadvantaged pupils in 2022-23, down from 47.4 per cent the year before.

However, although the number of courses delivered fell slightly from 2021-22, the government still hit the two million mark.

Nick Brook, the chief executive of Speakers for Schools and chair of the DfE's strategic tutoring advisory group, said this was "unexpected but welcome".

Data published for the first part of this term shows that just 35.6 per cent of schools have participated in the programme since September. At the same point last year, 43.7 per cent had used it.

3. Exam cheating up by a fifth

Cases of pupil cheating in exams increased 19 per cent this year, and are now 66 per cent higher than before the pandemic.

Ofqual data shows there were 4,895 cases of malpractice involving pupils that resulted in penalties, up from 4,105 in 2022 and 2,950 in pre-pandemic 2019.

However, cases of cheating remain tiny in comparison to the number of exam entries, which stood at 17 million across GCSEs, AS and A-levels.

Punishment is also becoming harsher, with 20 per cent of cases resulting in a "loss of aggregation of certification opportunity", meaning the pupil lost marks for the entire exam.

This compares with just 7 per cent of cases in 2022, and 15 per cent in 2019, the last pre-pandemic exam year.

4. Record fines for term-time holidays

The number of fines issued to parents for unauthorised school absence has rocketed to its highest level on record.

DfE data shows 398,796 penalty notices for unauthorised absence were issued in 2022-23, up from 218,235 last year and higher than the 333,388 in pre-pandemic 2018-19.

The vast majority (89 per cent) of absence fines issued last year were for unauthorised family holiday absence, up slightly from 86 per cent before the pandemic.

Despite the rise in the number of fines, the number of parenting orders following prosecution for unauthorised absence fell from 38 in 2021-22, to 30 in 2022-23.

At the same time, the number of education supervision orders – which councils must consider applying for before prosecuting parents – increased from 33 to 46.

5. 65,000 more exam grade appeals

More than 300,000 challenges of GCSE and A-level grades were made, up from about 235,000 in 2022.

But numbers still haven't returned to pre-pandemic levels.

In 2019, 343,905 appeals were launched, equating to about 6 per cent of all the marks awarded (6,069,140).

This year, 303,270 appeals (4.9 per cent) of the 6,171,265 marks awarded were challenged, a one percentage point rise on 2022.

Despite this, grade changes have remained steady. Four years ago, almost 70,000 marks were altered, equating to about 1.15 per cent of marks awarded.

Almost 54,000 marks (0.9 per cent) were changed in 2022, compared with 66,205 (1.07 per cent) this summer.

NEWS: OFSTED

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Inside Ofsted's emergency inspector training

AMY WALKER
@AMYRWALKER

Ofsted inspectors received emergency training this week on how to manage school leader anxiety, after a coroner ruled inspection contributed to the death of a Berkshire headteacher.

Senior coroner Heidi Connor said last week that Ruth Perry's mental health "deteriorated significantly" after an inspection last autumn that rated Caversham Primary School 'inadequate'.

She plans to issue a report aimed at preventing future deaths, highlighting serious concerns including an "almost complete absence" of inspector training on dealing with signs of distress.

In response, chief inspector Amanda Spielman announced a one-day delay to inspections this week so that lead inspectors could attend emergency training.

Schools Week spoke to inspectors who attended the 90-minute session to find out what was discussed.

What did the training cover?

Connor warned last week that parts of the Ofsted inspection at Caversham were "conducted in a manner which lacked fairness, respect and sensitivity" and that it was "at times rude and intimidating".

Slides from the training session seen by *Schools Week* outlined "signs of anxiety and stress" that inspectors should be "alert to".

These included "crying or becoming tearful", a "change in voice pitch" and "rapid or mumbled" speech.

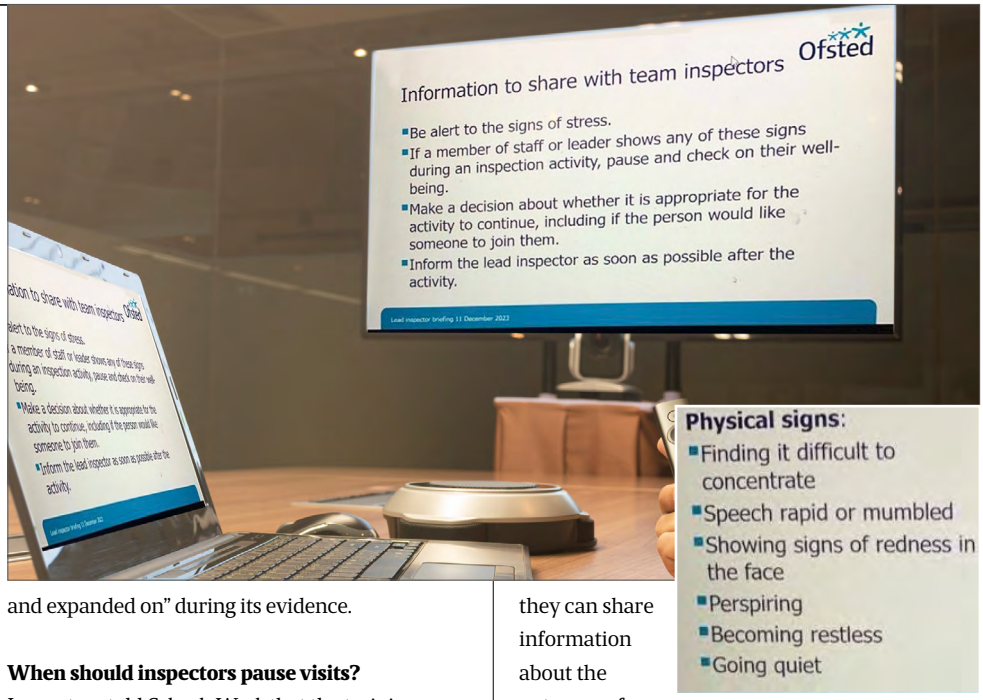
One inspector described it as "basic, given that these are senior leaders", but added "maybe it speaks volumes that they do need a basic course".

Another slide from the training said that if a member of staff or leaders "shows any of these signs" during an inspection, inspectors should "pause and check on their wellbeing".

They should also "make a decision about whether it is appropriate for the activity to continue".

Last week, Connor said it was "suggested" by Ofsted witnesses that there was an option to pause an inspection because of teacher "distress". But neither the school nor council was aware of this.

Instead, the concept of a pause was "something of a mythical creature" that Ofsted had "created and expanded on" during its evidence.



When should inspectors pause visits?

Inspectors told *Schools Week* that the training advised them to call Ofsted's helpdesk and request to pause an inspection "if we think it's got to an extreme state".

The request would then "go up the chain". In another slide, inspectors were reminded to "encourage the headteacher to bring someone with them" to meetings, and to emphasise they would have the "opportunity to comment and ask questions".

The training was delivered by His Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) and followed by a question-and-answer session with director of education Chris Russell, alongside regional directors.

One inspector said they were told at 8am on Monday about the training, while another said only eight minutes were allowed for questions.

But none of those who spoke to *Schools Week* were particularly critical of the session's contents.

"It needs to be far more detailed, but I equally am very pleased they put on a short-term measure," one said.

Two inspectors said they had never received training on headteacher welfare before, despite Ofsted's claims at the inquest that this was a "core value".

What changes have been made?

An email seen by *Schools Week* shows Ofsted has updated the script it gives to lead inspectors.

Additional prompts now include a reference to making sure "the headteacher knows that they can share information about the outcome of an inspection with loved ones and medical professionals".

This follows a finding that the confidentiality requirement around inspection outcomes was a "significant issue" for Perry.

Connor said Perry was "never told that she could discuss the matter, for instance, with mental health professionals, despite the obvious concern of some of the inspectors on the day".

This week inspectors also said they had been given a "brand new" addition to their duties: to identify a person responsible for the welfare of the headteacher at the start of an inspection.

Leaders could also "contact Ofsted to speak to a senior inspector while the inspection is happening", if they felt they could not raise issues with the lead inspector.

This marks a step up from Ofsted's previous reforms, which offered schools the chance to call Ofsted the day after the end of an inspection if they had "unresolved issues".

What happens next?

Monday's training was delivered only to lead inspectors due to inspect schools this week.

In an email, the watchdog said it was developing a training programme for all inspectors starting in January that would run through the spring term "as a minimum" and include input from external organisations.

NEWS: OFSTED

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Amanda Spielman's end of term report card

AMY WALKER
@AMYRWALKER

Amanda Spielman steps down at the end of this month after seven years at Ofsted, leaving an education system with more schools rated 'good' or better.

But how much of the change during her tenure as chief inspector is due to genuine school improvement, and how much is down to changes to inspection?

FFT Education Datalab shared its latest analysis with *Schools Week*.

More schools 'good'...

Datalab compared the grade profile of all schools in December 2016, just before Spielman took over, with the most recent grade profile in November 30 this year.

In 2016, 87 per cent of schools were judged 'good' or 'outstanding'. Today that stands at 89 per cent.

The increase has been driven by a rise in the proportion of schools rated 'good' – from 67 to 73 per cent, and a corresponding drop in the proportion rated 'requires improvement' from 9.7 to 8.5 per cent, and 'inadequate' from 3.4 to 2.5 per cent.

...but fewer 'outstanding' grades

However, the proportion of schools rated 'outstanding' also fell, from 20 per cent seven years ago to 16 per cent today.

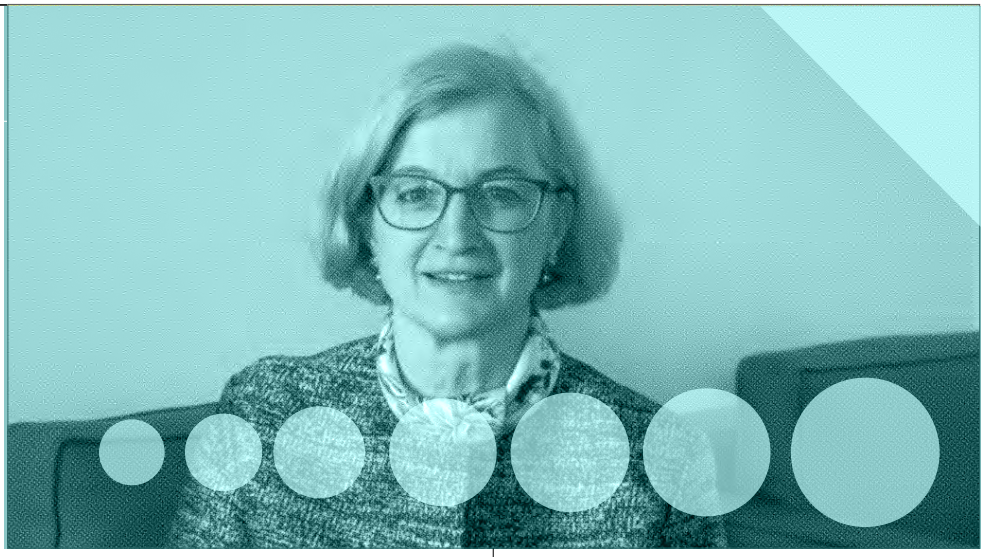
'Outstanding' schools were exempt from routine inspection for about a decade until a policy change in 2020. Many have since lost their top rating.

Ofsted's framework also changed in 2019, focusing more on what is taught in schools than outcomes for pupils.

Most schools with a negative grade improve

The analysis also found that relatively few schools that were graded 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' before Spielman took over remain so today.

Just 3 per cent of primary, 4 per cent of special and 9 per cent of secondary schools had judgments of less than 'good' at the beginning and end of the her appointment.



Do MATs boost Ofsted grade?

The number of schools in multi-academy trusts has ballooned during her tenure.

Datalab found the grades of schools in large trusts – those with 10 or more schools – have improved substantially.

In 2016, 66 per cent of schools in large MATs were judged 'good' or better, compared with 89 per cent of schools maintained by councils or in smaller trusts. As of November this year, 90 per cent of the same group of schools in large MATs had a positive Ofsted grade, the same as those in other structures.

But chief statistician Dave Thomson said "more needs to be done" to establish causality between MAT membership and improving Ofsted grades.

Poorer schools have improved...

Ofsted has often faced criticism that schools with more deprived intakes are less likely to get top grades.

Schools Week analysis found schools in the poorest areas are now getting better grades, but there is still a huge gap with their wealthier counterparts. Datalab's analysis supports our findings.

'Good' or 'outstanding ratings fell in schools with the lowest free school meals rate.

At primary level, the proportion of these schools with a top grade fell from 96 per cent in 2016 to 95 per cent this year. At secondary level, the fall was from 95 to 93 per cent.

Schools with the highest proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals tended to improve on reinspection.

At primary level, 80 per cent of schools in the top quintile were good or better in 2016, versus 86 per cent in 2023. At secondary level, the increase was from 57 to 74 per cent.

...but they're more likely to have been inspected

Datalab pointed out that while "on the surface" this showed improved grades for disadvantaged schools, the most deprived schools were more likely to have had a full inspection since January 2016.

Of the least deprived, 40 per cent of primaries and 57 per cent of secondaries have been inspected since 2016, compared with 65 per cent of primaries and 83 per cent of secondaries in the most deprived quintile.

Hard to tell if schools are improving

Thomson said his analysis "raises the question of what it means to be 'good'". He pointed to the change in the early years of the coalition government when 'satisfactory' became 'requires improvement', which may have driven an increase in 'good' schools.

He also questioned how well the public understood the the differences in Ofsted framework and whether differences in framework could lead to different judgments about a school.

"This matters because claims are made about the quality of the schools' system based on increasing percentages of schools judged 'good' or 'outstanding'. But I'm not sure we have much idea from this data whether schools are improving or not."

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Who would want to be a headteacher?

AMY WALKER
@AMYRWALKER

Most headteachers would not recommend the job, while fewer assistant and deputy heads want the top post, shows a new survey from the leaders' union NAHT.

The startling figures – which also show that 72 per cent of respondents say the job has had a negative impact on their wellbeing – reveal that 40 per cent of leaders have accessed mental health support in the past year.

It comes after *Schools Week* uncovered that headteacher turnover in September was 14 per cent higher than before the pandemic, suggesting departures are no longer associated with a Covid backlog but with the increased demands of the job.

The union surveyed 1,890 of its members in England between September and October. Nearly three-fifths (57 per cent) said they were unlikely to recommend school leadership, up from 47 per cent in 2021 and 32 per cent in 2020.

About a quarter (23 per cent) said they would recommend the role, the same as in 2021 and less than half of the 47 per cent in 2020.

Meanwhile, fewer assistant and deputy heads said they wanted to become a head. More than three in five (61 per cent) said they did not aspire to headship, a rise of eight percentage points since last year.


Paul Whiteman

When asked the same question in 2016, 40 per cent said they did not aspire to headship.

Almost two in three (61 per cent) said their level of work satisfaction had declined over the past 12 months.

The wellbeing of school leaders has been highlighted in recent years, with *Schools Week* revealing in October that ministers were extending a mental health support package for heads, hundreds of whom were waiting for help.

Nearly half – 49 per cent – of leaders said they "had a need" for professional mental health or wellbeing support in the past year.

Almost four in 10 said they had accessed such support. A further 7 per cent wanted help, but did not know how to secure it, while 5 per cent said they found access to be unavailable.

Paul Whiteman, the union's general secretary, said: "These dire findings paint a really bleak picture of the unacceptable toll school leadership is taking on our members and their mental health and wellbeing.

"Reluctance to take on the role of headteacher is now an established and rising trend that will inevitably impact the wider school eco-system, and ultimately, children's education."

Asked how school leadership could become more attractive, most respondents said greater recognition of leaders as trusted professionals (86 per cent).

This was followed by pay that "properly" remunerated the range of senior responsibilities associated with the role and ensuring pay maintained its real terms value against inflation (both 72 per cent).

AMY WALKER | @AMYRWALKER

Mental health policies for young people still in the pipeline

Ministers are yet to fully implement about two thirds of policies supposed to improve children and young people's mental health, a new study suggests.

The Education Policy Institute (EPI) analysed the progress of 135 policies on mental health introduced by successive governments since 2015, and found just 36 per cent had been fully implemented.

"Some" action had been taken for more than half (58 per cent), with researchers saying it was "unclear whether any progress had been made" on 6 per cent.

The report also found data on new mental health support teams set up to support schools is "fragmented", and warned their focus on "mild to moderate" mental health issues meant more serious cases fell through the gap.

The EPI also found it was "unclear" whether there had been any progress towards the government's goal of providing mental health awareness training to every school.

In its recommendations, it said the government must ensure a "coordinated cross-departmental response" to prevent "derailment" of its remaining commitments on mental health.

The report said all secondary schools should have access to a qualified and accredited mental health professional.

Schools should "consider approaches" on counselling that were "high quality and evidence based", ensure confidentiality and allow time for pupils to "decompress" following sessions.

The DfE should aim to ensure all teachers "have the knowledge and skills to recognise and respond appropriately" to mental health needs and continue to "develop and expand age-appropriate programmes" to help pupils and staff discuss mental health from an early age.

NEWS: SCHOOL BUILDINGS

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‘Don’t sell your sites’, shrinking schools warned

JACK DYSON
@JACKYDYS

Trusts and councils facing falling rolls should use empty school buildings to house other public services, the boss of the Department for Education’s property arm has said.

Lara Newman, the chief executive of LocatED, warned a Westminster Education Forum webinar this week that the government would find it “very difficult” to re-acquire sites if pupil numbers rose again.

Her warning follows the DfE asking her organisation to check out hundreds of sites with “underutilised land” and to advise it on how the sales could fund vital rebuilds.

Primary schools have been struggling to fill places following a drop in the birth rate, with the number of reception-age children due to drop by 760,747 between 2022 and 2032.

Urban councils, which have been hit particularly badly, have slashed admission numbers and have ordered some primaries to close.

But Newman, whose property company is responsible on the DfE’s behalf for buying and developing sites for free schools, believes a “medium-term” solution could be “co-locating” community services in spaces left empty by the crisis until rolls recover.

Lara Newman

“We’ll be in a really difficult situation if we allow responsible bodies to sell off these school sites... only to be in a situation in 15, 20, 25 years when the population will naturally recover.

“We’ll find it very, very difficult to re-buy those sites in certain areas.”

She said working on the free school programme had showed her that “buying sites in London, Bristol, Birmingham, Leeds are all really difficult calls – and they’re expensive. So we need to find a medium-term use for some of these buildings.”

London’s birth rate dropped 17 per cent between 2012 and 2021, equivalent to 23,225 fewer children. Almost 15 per cent of school places in the city are now unfilled.

Council leaders have warned that Brexit, the Covid pandemic and the cost of housing has exacerbated problems in the capital.

Newman said there was “a real danger” of London becoming childless. “These are really, really serious issues and we need to find a medium-term way to manage those.

“We’ve got significant demand for high-needs... places, nursery and childcare [and] some of the more commercial uses that will help schools maintain viability across the estate. Losing the estate is a really serious issue now.”

She said LocatED was “interested” in how it could “co-locate more services into school locations to serve the community” through the Local Government Association and Office of Government Property’s “place pilot” project.

The trial aims to “optimise investment...by identifying opportunity for co-location, disposals, relocations, land assembly and other multi-portfolio collaboration”.

The scheme will be run over 18 months in Derby, Hull, Sheffield, West Midlands and the London boroughs of Barking and Dagenham, Hackney and Newham.

Newman also said LocatED could explore placing recently closed children’s centres into “schools that are half empty”.

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

Data for rebuilding programme “flawed’, says councillor

The school building condition data used to select the first 100 projects in the government’s flagship rebuilding programme was “inaccurate and flawed, says a Stockport councillor.

Launched by Boris Johnson in 2021, schools in the first two rounds of the rebuilding programme were selected based on the DfE’s condition data collection (CDC) between 2017 and 2019.

Nominations were then invited last year for the next 300 projects.

Wendy Meikle, Stockport’s cabinet member for education, told a webinar this week that two urgent rebuilds in her area did not make the cut for the first 100 projects, but have now been listed after the invitation for nominations.

“The first two rounds were based on DfE condition data, data we believe to be inaccurate and flawed,” the Liberal Democrat said.

“The DfE has listened to feedback and the third round was based on nominations using our own data, which seems fairer.”

In “exceptional cases”, leaders could submit applications with “professional evidence” if blocks had “issues that presented a risk of imminent closure, were not identified in CDC data and could only be resolved through a rebuild”.

But the CDC data was also “used to assess rebuilding need in the buildings nominated”.

Thorn Grove Primary in Cheadle Hulme was the first of the Stockport schools to secure a place. It was joined by Moorfield Primary last December.

Meikle said experience of the successful bids “has been positive and DfE colleagues have listened, collaborated and enacted plans based on local needs”.

The DfE said its “data is not inaccurate”. The information collected “is at a visual, high level, and is primarily used to help inform our understanding of the estate”.

It is “not a structural nor a health and safety survey”. A new CDC s expected to be completed in 2026.

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Outwood Grange appoints interim CEO

One of the country's largest academy trusts has appointed an interim chief executive as its outgoing leader prepares to take the reins at Ofsted.

Lee Wilson will take charge of Outwood Grange on an interim basis from January 1. He is currently the trust's deputy chief executive.

Sir Martyn Oliver, the outgoing boss, becomes the new chief inspector at Ofsted next month.

Wilson said he was "excited to take on the role of interim CEO at this exceptional organisation, where every single person strives to do their very best, every day, to put students first".

"I am certain that by working collectively, and in strong collaboration across the entire family of schools, we will achieve many great things within, and for our school communities."

Wilson spent 10 years as executive principal of Outwood Grange's 13 primary schools before he became Oliver's deputy.

He has been a national leader of education since 2013 and has received a national teaching award.


Lee Wilson

Outwood Grange said Wilson "spearheaded" the trust's strategy to establish support hubs, "which serve as vital resources not only for students but also for the wider community".

The trust has not yet confirmed arrangements for appointing a permanent chief executive.

Full story here

Coalition calls for 'well-being supervisors'

The government should create a national network of "well-being supervisors" to provide "one-to-one personal support" for staff with mental health responsibilities, says a coalition of leaders in education.

The Coalition for Youth Mental Health in Schools also called for mandated waiting times for all child and adolescent mental health services, more mental health training in teacher education and a national survey of youth mental health.

Members of the coalition include leaders from Star Academies, Oasis Community Learning and Reach Academy Feltham, as well as representatives of private institutions such as Alleyn's school, Eton College and St Paul's.

The group released a report in 2021 that highlighted the difficulties young people faced in the wake of the pandemic, but said its calls for urgency had "gone unanswered".

Vulnerable pupils were let down by delays and "insufficient availability of care", the coalition said in its latest report.

"And while there is a colossal effort underway in schools to tackle these challenges, there are still too many hurdles for too many pupils when it comes to accessing mental health support."

Any wellbeing supervisor support would have to external, "at least from another school, and detached from any line management responsibilities".

Full story here

Educational psychologists call off strikes

Educational psychologists across England have called off planned strikes after accepting an improved pay offer.

The Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) this week approved a raft of pay measures from the Local Government Association (LGA), following strikes this term over an offer for the past academic year.

Councils offered a £1,925 increase on all pay points, which the AEP said averaged a 3 per cent rise, well below the rate of inflation.

The association said the deal approved this week includes that rise for 2022-23, backdated to last September, but with an additional 4 per cent rise to all pay points, backdated to this September.

An extra three pay points will be added at the top of the 'A' and 'B' scales and the bottom point will be deleted from pay scales for assistant and trainee EPs.

The government has committed £21 million to train 400 more educational psychologists from 2024, with a deadline for applications of November 29, according to the AEP.

But the organisation's website says that recruitment for next year is still "subject to the agreement of a funding contract with the Department for Education, which we hope will be concluded shortly".

David Johnston, the children's minister, said on December 4 that the 2024 intake was "subject to a live procurement".

Full story here

NEWS

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Budget cuts 'larger' in deprived secondaries

FREDDIE WHITTAKER
@FCDWHITTAKER

Budget cuts in real terms between 2010 and 2021 were more than double in the most deprived secondary schools than the least-deprived, new analysis shows.

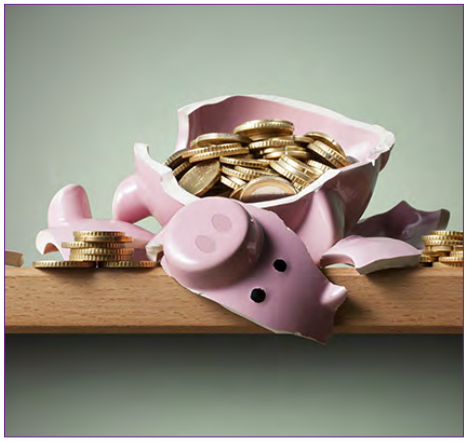
The Institute for Fiscal Studies' (IFS) annual report on education spending also shows soaring costs make ministers' promises to bring funding back to 2010 levels by next year further out of reach.

In this week's report, it said schools' spending power would be 4 per cent lower.

But analysis by the think tank found that schools serving more disadvantaged pupils "have seen larger spending cuts over time".

Spending per pupil in the most deprived fifth of secondary schools fell by 12 per cent in real terms between 2010 and 2021, compared with just 5 per cent for the least deprived fifth.

The most deprived schools still had a funding advantage – poorer pupils attract extra uplifts – but this shrunk from 31 per cent in 2010 to 21 per cent in 2021.



Since 2015, the value of the pupil premium – paid to schools for some vulnerable children and those eligible for free school meals at any point in the previous six years – has eroded by 14 per cent in real terms.

The introduction of a minimum funding guarantee for schools in 2020 also "disproportionately benefited less deprived schools".

In recent years, in part due to high-profile campaigns by unions, ministers have sought to address the funding crisis brought on by around a decade of real-terms cuts.

Gillian Keegan, the education secretary, said last year the government's current funding settlement "would allow schools to return to at least 2010 levels in real terms".

In October, the IFS predicted schools' purchasing power would be 3 per cent lower in real terms in 2024 than it was when the Conservatives came to power.

In today's report, it said schools' spending power would be 4 per cent lower.

The situation is worse for sixth forms, whose spending power will be 23 per cent below 2010 levels next year.

Luke Sibieta, a research fellow at the IFS, warned of "increases in educational inequalities since the pandemic, growing hardship due to the rising cost of living, and severe strain on children's social services".

"This magnifies the challenges faced by nurseries, schools and colleges serving the most disadvantaged communities."

Luke Sibieta

SAMANTHA BOOTH | @SAMANTHAJBOOTH

Leaders warn against sudden EBacc reform

School leaders have warned against sudden changes to secondary education without sufficient resources after the House of Lords called for reforms that include an end to the English baccalaureate (EBacc).

Its committee on education for 11 to 16-year-olds warned this week that the system was "too focused" on academic learning and written exams.

A cross-party report argued ministers' emphasis on a knowledge-rich approach had "overloaded" the curriculum.

It also said the government should abandon the EBacc, which measures schools on the proportion of pupils entering a suite of five subject areas.

External assessment at age 16 should be reduced, but more non-exam assessments introduced.

However, Caroline Barlow, the vice-chair of the Headteachers Roundtable, warned that the sector was "prone to swinging from one end of the pendulum to another".

"We've got to be a little careful before we put schools through more dramatic change to work out exactly what it is we want to achieve."

Steve Rollett, the deputy chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts, said there were "issues with the underlying analysis".

He said while the committee was right to question EBacc, "it's not just because of curriculum narrowing and loss of arts/tech subjects.

"It's also because the government has failed over a long period to attract teachers of EBacc subjects. Schools can't hold accountability for something that isn't matched by the resource to deliver it."

It was revealed last week that just half of the secondary school teacher recruitment target had been met this year.

The committee called for a reduction of "rote learning" to give schools capacity to "offer a more varied, richer range of learning experiences and develop a broader set of skills".

It said the extent of material "hampers pupils' understanding of core concepts and stifles engagement".

However, David Thomas, a former DfE special adviser who now runs the maths charity MESME, said a knowledge-rich approach "does not mean a 'pub quiz' curriculum of disconnected facts".

"It means giving children a rich foundation of understanding from which to build. It's right to be revisiting our curriculum and asking how it can be made better, but we should be taking steps forwards not back."

A DfE spokesperson said its knowledge-rich curriculum equipped pupils with the knowledge and skills they needed for the future.

POLITICS

I was wrong on 'golden handcuffs', says Hinds

FREDDIE WHITTAKER
@FCDWHITTAKER


Damian Hinds

Damian Hinds has admitted he was "wrong" as education secretary to reduce bursaries for maths teachers in favour of "golden handcuff" payments in their early careers.

The schools minister's admission came when he appeared this week alongside senior DfE official Sue Lovelock in front of the education committee. Here's what we learned...

1. 'I was wrong on golden handcuffs'

A recent government report concluded that a 2018 pilot reducing an initial bursary for maths teachers in favour of retention payments likely resulted in a net loss of almost 200 entrants to the profession. Hinds was education secretary at the time.

He told MPs that so-called "golden handcuffs" were "something I was in a previous time at DfE particularly keen on. And I turned out to be wrong."

However, he said he was "still not opposed to the principle" of golden handcuffs, a feature in the newer early career payments and levelling-up premium policies.

2. ECF changes from 2025

Changes to the early career framework (ECF) to address concerns about the induction period for new teachers will come into effect in 2025, Hinds said.

However, aside from some work to address "duplication" between ECF content and what teachers learned during their training, no specific changes were outlined.

Hinds was responding to concerns that new teachers and their mentors struggled to balance time off timetable with workload.

The minister said if there was a "mismatch in how much time the professional development is taking relative to that extra time, then of course we need to address that".

Lovelock said the DfE was looking to "strip out duplication".

3. 'Trailblazers' working on non-grad apprenticeship route

A government "trailblazer group" is working on plans for an apprenticeship route into teaching for non-graduates.

The DfE revealed earlier this year that, after several false starts, it was developing a teaching degree apprenticeship.

Lovelock said the department "thinks it's got lots of potential to offer a new route into the teaching profession".

Plans were "very much at the development stage", with a trailblazer group from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education now developing the "knowledge, skills and behaviours needed".

4. New 'refined' workload toolkit coming

The DfE published a school workload reduction toolkit in 2018.

But recent data from Teacher Tapp found that about a third of senior leaders hadn't heard of it, another third had not read it and 23 per cent had read it but did not find it useful. Only 9 per cent reported finding it useful.

Hinds told MPs the document had been downloaded 30,000 times "so it's not a trivial number. I'd like it to be more".

He also acknowledged that "trying to get people to do another thing, which is to download [the toolkit]...that is itself an extra task. But we think there's a lot of value to it".

The toolkit was "not perfect. And it is going to be refined into a better, digital, slicker and therefore quicker to use version."

5. No date yet to complete strategy 'refresh'

A "refresh" of the government's 2019 teacher recruitment and retention strategy was "working at pace", but there was no date for its publication. The strategy was launched when Hinds was education secretary.

He said a review was "progressing at pace, as they say, but it's also really important we get it right".

6. Maths target not reduced to make DfE look good

Last week, it emerged the government had recruited half the secondary teachers needed this year.

It missed targets last year by about two fifths, including in maths, despite reducing the number of would-be maths staff by 760. The target was then increased by 920 this year, and missed by 37 per cent.

When Hinds was asked why the target was cut, he said the model was "complex" and that the DfE was "trying to recruit more maths teachers".

Pressed on whether the reduction in last year's target was an attempt to make sure the government "missed the target by less", Hinds said: "No. The model is not there to be a consumer-facing thing, it's there to guide where we are really concentrating effort and resources and incentives."

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Investigation

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How investors are making millions from 'bankrupt' SEND system

Independent SEND schools run by private equity firms are now propping up the sector amid a capacity crisis created by the sluggish state. But at what cost? Schools Week investigates ...

Companies backed by private equity investors and a Middle East sovereign wealth fund running private special schools have made millions in profits amid a state capacity crisis.

The firms – many of which also run children's homes – said they provide high quality education filling a "significant shortfall" in provision, meaning pupils with special needs are not left behind.

But, average independent special school costs are double that of the state sector, analysis suggests, with some councils unable to afford recent increases.

One analysis estimates some companies are making tens of millions of pounds in profit, with one director paid £1.1 million last year. Some are registered in tax havens.

While government is telling some cash-strapped councils to rein in their spend on private schools, the state's sluggish response to demand means they are locked into a "circle of financial doom", said national SEND leader Warren Carratt.

"The government's failure to effectively plan for – and adequately invest in – the increased demand has left some providers in the independent sector making eye-watering profits at the expense of already hugely overspent high needs budgets," he added.

"Meanwhile, government guidance is in turn allowing and enabling state special schools to have their budgets reduced – leaving an ever-increasing role for the independent sector.

"It is a damning indictment of the free market principles that – as with independent children's homes – are holding our public sector budgets to ransom and moving our councils and state special schools toward bankruptcy," he said.

Private school spend soars

The combined deficit for councils with high needs funding blackholes was £1.59 billion as of March 2023, according to analysis from the Special Needs Jungle website.

Yet councils spent £1.3 billion on independent and non-maintained special schools (NMSS) in 2021-22, more than double the £576 million spent in 2015-16, government data shows. The number of pupils at these schools has risen by 52 per cent over that time, as an explosion in pupils with additional needs outstripped capacity in the state sector.

However, the average cost of an independent and NMSS place in 2021-22 was £56,710 – more

Investigation: Special schools

than double the £23,224 average cost of a place at a state special school, *Schools Week* analysis found.

In its 2022 SEND green paper, the Department for Education said this was because such schools often cater for pupils "with very complex needs".

But they also said capacity pressures in the SEND sector mean more children are being placed in private special schools "even when this may not be the most effective setting for them, resulting in poor value for money".

Government has recently told some councils to rein in such spend as part of its "safety valve" scheme. Thirty-four councils with the largest high needs deficit blackholes have been given government bailouts totalling nearly £1 billion.

Spending on private SEND schools among the 23 safety valve councils that responded to our freedom of information request rose by 43 per cent from £210 million in 2018-19, to £301 million in 2021-22.

Surrey's costs rose from £48 million to £74 million in that period. In 2022-23, they topped £86 million. Kent's has risen from £34 million to £67 million this year.

Sluggish state creates gap in market

In January, Bury council said its specialist provisions "are full" meaning "we have been forced to place significant numbers" in the independent sector, where its spend rose from £5.3 million in 2018-19, to £10.6 million in 2022-23.

Nationally, the number of youngsters with education, health and care plans – a legal document that sets out extra support a pupil must receive – has risen by 46 per cent since 2018-19, from about 354,000 to 517,000.

However, delivery of new state special schools has not kept up. *Schools Week* revealed last year how just one of 37 new free schools announced in 2020 had opened in its permanent home. Six first approved in 2017 were still yet to open.

There were 712 independent and NMSS schools in 2022-23, up from 547 in 2018-19.

SEND consultant Barney

'Companies are very agile and responsive to demand'

Angliss said companies have been given "an opportunity to step in where the system is failing".

Firms can set up new provision within 12 to 15 months and are "very agile and responsive" to demand, said Claire Dorer, chief executive of the sector body the National Association of Special Schools (NASS).

Outcomes First Group, one of the largest private SEND school providers, is working with councils that had bids for new special free schools rejected. Last year, government approved fewer than half of the 85 applications by local authorities.

A spokesperson for the firm said its work "helps LAs meet the significant shortfall in provision for the children that we educate, who without our specialist provision, would be left with no option but to remain out of education ... Without this provision, LAs would not be able to educate these children, which they are legally mandated to do."

Government is investing £2.6 billion between 2022 and 2025 to increase special school and alternative provision capacity. But SEND specialist Matt Keer said it's still "not happening fast enough".

Councils 'unprepared' to pay fee rises

Schools forum documents for Bury council state the average independent special school fee increased by approximately 10 per cent in the last year "as these schools look to pass on cost increases".

September schools forum documents for Merton, Southwest London, reveal that their non-maintained special schools are "asking for very high fee uplifts, many of which we are unprepared to pay".

Sheffield, which is not in a safety valve agreement, said this year that the average independent place now costs £70,000, with the highest £111,000. This was a "significant pressure" on high needs allocations and a seven per cent increase in a year.

Our analysis found the average cost of a private school placement rose by eight per cent between 2018-19 and 2021-22. However, the average state school cost rose by 15 per cent – although they remain significantly lower overall.

But Dorer said independent special schools "are still the placement of last resort ... too much of the time".

"When you place a young person at 13 or 14 who has just seen needs go unaddressed for year after year, it is going to be more difficult and more expensive to affect a change with them."

Meanwhile, at Outcomes First Group, they have class sizes of between three to 10 pupils, with one teacher to every two children. The ratio is about one teacher for every six pupils in state special schools and pupil referral units, according to government workforce data.

Carratt, chief executive officer of Nexus MAT, added most state schools have been "hand to mouth for the best part of the last decade".

However, 89 per cent of state special schools are currently 'good' or 'outstanding' – above the 81 per cent of special independent schools that are inspected by Ofsted.

Warren Carratt

Claire Dorer

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Firms make millions from 'fragmented' sector

To get an idea of the main providers of independent SEND provision, we asked the "safety valve" councils for their individual placement costs.

Of the ten providers that received the most money from the 22 councils that responded to our FOI, five were owned by offshore companies. Three are owned by private equity.

Another is owned by an Abu Dhabi sovereign wealth fund. A further three were charities.

It is difficult to establish how much profit firms are making from the SEND sector alone, as many also provide children's social care placements.

But, a report commissioned by the Local Government Association on children's social care this year estimated four of the companies in our analysis made £184 million in profit in the last reporting period alone (see box out).

The profits relate to wider children's services income, but would include SEND provision.

Dorer said while companies are making profit, they "all have to bear a loss while they are setting up new provision, and they are bearing a considerable risk".

However, John Pearce, Association of Directors of Children's Services' president, said there are similar "concerns" to the "profiteering, costs spiralling and lack of control the local authorities have over the whole system" as seen in the children's home sector.

The Competition and Markets Authority said in 2021 that the UK had "sleepwalked" into a "dysfunctional children's social care market" with councils "hamstrung in their efforts to find suitable and affordable placements" in children's homes or foster care.

It said the largest private providers were "making materially higher profits, and charging materially higher prices, than we would expect if this market were functioning effectively".

Independent SEND school provider Aspris – set up by Dutch private equity firm Waterland – stated on its website that "surging demand" is "undersupplied by the existing and fragmented capacity, which in many cases is also dated, under-

Who are the firms making millions?

Outcomes First Group recorded £445 million children's services income across its last two sets of accounts, according to LGA's analysis, put together by Revolution Consulting in September.

The company's EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization) figure was £93 million, the analysis claimed.

Andrew Rome, the report author, said EBITDA is one of the most widely used measures of profitability. His analysis found Outcomes had a profit margin of 20.9 per cent.

According to our FOI figures, Outcomes First Group and its brand Acorn Education received a combined estimate of £81 million within the last six years from the 22 safety valve councils that responded.

The group, which has 56 schools in England and also runs children's homes, was acquired by private equity firm Stirling Square Capital Partners in 2019. Its ultimate controlling party is in Jersey.

A spokesperson said they have "never paid a dividend to any shareholder, reinvests all profits into opening new schools and all taxes due are paid in the UK".

Witherslack, which runs 24 schools as well as therapeutic learning centres and children's homes, recorded the largest profit margin of 26.5 per cent, according to the LGA report. It had an income of £148 million.

Mubadala Capital, a subsidiary of Abu Dhabi's second-largest sovereign wealth fund, owns the company. It was acquired from private equity firm Charme Capital Partners in 2021. Witherslack received an estimated £30 million from the councils within the last six years, our FOI found.

The company did not respond to requests for comment. But a 2021-22 annual report from the Witherslack Group said all profits are reinvested as capital expenditure. The company told The Times last year that "its structure was not designed to avoid paying tax".

Aspris was set up by Waterland, a Dutch private equity firm, when it bought The Priory Group in 2021 for £1.1 billion. It runs 34 specialist schools and colleges in the UK as well as children's homes.

The most recent accounts for Aspris Holdco Limited show that the highest paid director received £1.1 million, including a one-off award of £305,000 "relating to the exceptionally high level of corporate transactions and reorganisation activity successfully completed during the period".

According to the FOI figures, it has received an estimated £33.7 million from cash-strapped councils. The LGA report suggests the firm has an EBITDA of £47 million, a 25.1 per cent margin. The firm declined to comment.

The Cambian Group, owned by CareTech, runs 34 schools in England and Wales. Last year, The Times reported CareTech sent more than £2 million to its founders' offshore company in the Caribbean while accepting government Covid support.

Lawyers for two brothers who founded the company told the newspaper they "pay all their UK tax due" and make "significant social and economic contributions to charitable causes".

Last year's LGA report found CareTech's EBITDA to be £83.8 million, a margin of 27.3 per cent. But this year's analysis doesn't include the firm, partly because it delisted from the stock market. The company's ultimate controlling party is incorporated in Jersey.

The most recent accounts for CareTech Holdings Limited show an operating profit of £25.5 million and a net profit of £6.5 million.

Using just the net profit, it means the profit margin was 1.3 per cent, a spokesperson said. They added that CareTech "provides a much-needed education for children" with SEND.

But Anne Longfield, former children's commissioner, said these "eye-watering levels of profit" are "indefensible, in my view. It's taking money out of our statutory services at an alarming rate."

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invested and not fit for purpose".

The most recent accounts for Witherslack Group added it is continuing to "expand successfully" with new school and children's home openings "well received" by councils.

It is "particularly strengthened" by its expansion into new areas, "much of which has taken place in response to requests by local authorities", although it's not clear if this is just for schools.

A £7.1 million rise in profit after tax was "reflecting the increased capacity of the company", its latest annual accounts state.

Outcomes First Group has opened 18 new schools or extended others with 1,800 new desks in the last year alone. It plans to deliver the same expansion again over the next two years.

So what next?

But Meg Hillier, chair of the public accounts committee, said pressures on local authority spending for independent places "remain prohibitive" and leave councils facing "impossible choices and, too often, leaving children without the full support they need".

Ministers' SEND and alternative provision implementation plan, published in March, pledges to "re-examine the state's relationship with independent special schools to ensure we set comparable expectations for all state-funded specialist providers".

A "fragmented" management based on councils' individual pupil placements "is inefficient" and "makes it difficult to assess the overall impact of independent special schools".

The Department for Education is now considering how these schools should be aligned with new national SEND standards to "define the provision they offer and bring consistency and transparency to their costs".

Carratt added the "biggest risk" for state schools is that councils "can't control what independent schools charge".

He said this risks councils directing more state schools to take children they cannot accommodate – to avoid the costs of an independent place – and state schools get reduced funding because of "independent placements negatively impacting" the high needs funding "bottom line".


Meg Hillier

The green paper did propose independent schools would be included in the new national tariffs – rules on prices that commissioners would use to pay providers. But it is not known if this will go ahead.

An LGA spokesperson added councils "need to be given powers to lead local SEND systems effectively and hold schools to account for levels of inclusion".

In the meantime, several councils have been told to reduce their spend.

In return for £142 million to eliminate its deficit in 2027-28, Kent must "implement models of reintegration of children from special/independent schools to mainstream where needs have been met". Norfolk has been told to agree an "inclusion charter" with schools in return for £70 million by 2028-29.

It should help mainstream schools to support "a greater complexity of need" so they are "stepping back from the over reliance" on the costly independent sector.

Healthy finances for private SEND school providers

Brand	Turnover as at August 2021	Turnover as at August 2022	% increase	Operating profit in 2022
Outcome First Group	£420.8m	£443.6m	5.4%	£14.1m
Aspris	N/A	£179.2m	N/A	£23.1m
Witherslack Group	£113.1m	£134.7m	19.1%	£27.8m
Horizon	£54.9m	£53.8m	-2.1%	£4.1m
Cavendish Education	£45.7m	£57.6m	25.9%	£4.8m
CareTech	£489.1m	£510.7m	4.4%	£25.5m

Source: Companies House accounts

Note: All run children's social care services excluding Cavendish Education

SCHOOLS WEEK

JESSICA HILL | @JESSJANEHILL

Firms step in as SEMH needs soar

Some of the biggest children's social care providers are stepping in to meet soaring demand for specialist social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) schools amid a mental health crisis and increased behaviour challenges.

SEMH is a relatively new subset of SEND, which replaced the term emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) in the 2014 reforms.

There are 1,015 SEMH schools in England, including 339 academies, 396 maintained schools and 229 independent SEMH schools.

Public data on these schools doesn't include open dates. But analysis found around 50 of the 63 independent education settings, which includes alternative provision, proposed to open and pre-inspected by Ofsted since 2021 cater for children with SEMH needs.

Meanwhile, the state sector has been opening fewer SEMH schools every year, dropping from 17 opened in 2016 to six so far this year.

The top five biggest children's social care providers now operate 104 SEMH-associated schools.

All five - Outcomes First, Polaris, Aspris, CareTech and Witherslack - have a majority or minority private equity or sovereign wealth fund owner.

Year in review: Politics

NATALIE PERERA
Chief executive,
Education Policy Institute

Politicians can no longer ignore the impact of poverty

Four publications this month sum up the state of education policy as the year ends, and make next year's top priorities very clear, says Natalie Perera

As I look back on 2023, it feels like one of those years where so much has happened, yet little has changed. As I write this in mid-December, there have already been four pieces of sobering news this month alone that both epitomise the challenges of the past 12 months and cement the priorities for policy making in 2024.

Earlier this month, we saw the publication of the latest PISA results, where the UK has risen up the rankings and given the government some cause for celebration. But we must be cautious in interpreting these results given that, like most other countries, our results fell considerably as a result of the Covid pandemic. The picture it draws of our young people's mental health is also concerning.

While PISA continued to shed light on the impact of the pandemic, one piece of good news from this year is that EPI's analysis of assessment data found that pupils had largely caught up in reading by the end of 2022, a testament to the work of schools across the country.

Science, however, continues to be a cause for concern with the PISA results showing England's performance has been declining consistently since 2012. It's going to be very difficult for any government to address this decline as, according to the latest initial teacher training statistics also published this month, only 46 per cent of the government's recruitment target was met across all three sciences.

> "There has, at least, been some stability this year

Pay, workload and accountability form a complex set of issues for the government to resolve in addressing the teacher recruitment and retention challenges. Following a series of strikes in the first half of this year, there was some light as the government and unions finally agreed a settlement on teacher pay.

But as we edge closer towards the end of the year with Gillian Keegan already pre-empting more industrial action by promising to introduce minimum service levels, the unions are already putting pressure on her to issue her remit letter to the STRB without further delay.

We know that it's not only pay that matters for a healthy workforce. December also saw the verdict by the senior coroner of the inquest into the death of Ruth Perry, which concluded that her suicide was "contributed to by an Ofsted inspection".

While we cannot begin to understand the complexities surrounding this particular case, what is clear is the strength of feeling among the sector and public more widely that the implications of the accountability system need to be given more consideration.

As a starting point, Ofsted should commission an independent review into how it can learn lessons. Then it must be genuinely open to engaging with its findings. The government also needs to review the accountability system overall, ensuring that it strikes a fairer balance between delivering high educational standards and acknowledging the wider and increasing pressures facing the workforce.

December also saw the publication of the IFS's annual report on education spending, which confirmed that in the early years and pre-16 sectors the proportion of funding targeted to disadvantaged children has reduced. At a time when poverty and inequalities are rising, the report authors sum up this approach quite perfectly as "particularly illogical".

So, December signals the end of a tumultuous year for the DfE.

In better news there has, at least, been some stability this year. Although the sector bade farewell to DfE stalwart, Nick Gibb, Gillian Keegan has been in post longer than her four predecessors combined.

We don't know who will be in government this time next year, but any incoming government must have a laser focus on tackling the challenges facing the education system and doing so in an evidence-based way. More than that, policy-making in 2024 needs to avoid being a set of disjointed policies and set out a clear vision for the sector.

We cannot escape the fact that poverty and a dearth of early intervention services are making the job of educators unspeakably difficult. We must recognise the complex interdependencies between destitution and educational outcomes, and develop a plan to tackle both.

Year in review: MAT leadership

PETER HUGHES
CEO, Mossbourne Federation

Our focus must be on rebuilding a broken social contract

Trust leaders must learn from our longest-standing institutions and put long-term aims over short-term results, writes Peter Hughes

This year, 2023, has been monumental. Most recently, the Israel-Gaza war has reminded us how fragile peace and stability can be and how lucky we are to be living in a country where children can go about their daily lives freely.

Mossbourne is a diverse London trust and we have people affected on both sides of this conflict. It's very important that we as educators are neutral. Our job is to encourage people to use their voice responsibly.

At Mossbourne, we have a free press for our sixth formers, an essential part of making sure our young people understand what it means to have the ability to speak up and also the responsibility that comes with that.

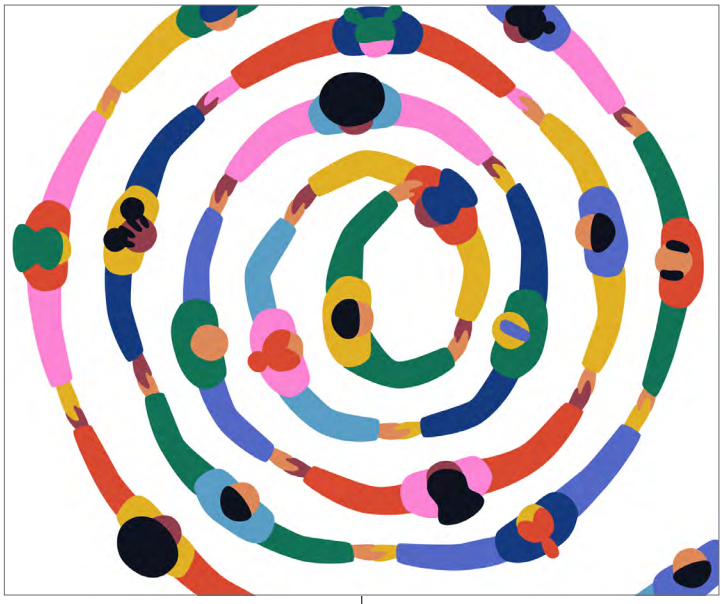
While we are fortunate to live in a country that is mainly peaceful, trust leaders have faced immediate and urgent challenges this year, including how we support local families to deal with the cost-of-living crisis.

For others, there has also been the impact of RAAC. Some children have been stuck at home again, not getting the education or socialisation they deserve and need. This is unacceptable, and all we can do is be honest and clear about the scale of the challenge ahead and the support needed.

Simultaneously, all trusts have had to focus on rebuilding the social contract around attending school. This social contract was broken in the pandemic and the damage will take years to undo. Ultimately, we need a strong focus on rebuilding trust across society, so that we can serve our communities well.

> "All we can do is be clear about the scale of the challenge

Speaking of the importance of trust, the developments made in generative AI this year have the potential to be one of the greatest transformations in our history. I have been teaching for over 25 years, and for the first time I can write a comprehensive digital strategy in the space of 20 minutes. I can ask AI to read websites and pick off key points for me. The potential right now feels limitless, particularly for someone like me with little time to write.



At the same time, we must all take time to consider just how racist AI might be. AI has mainly been developed by white men and it has the potential to be racist, sexist and misogynistic. We cannot afford to end up in an echo chamber, but we can't shut down AI. The only answer is to educate our children on how to use it and to debate the current issues with it openly.

Following the tragic passing of Ruth Perry and the conclusion of the inquest, we are all reflecting on the power that institutions have. With a new lead inspector for Ofsted in the new year, I think we all also need to reflect on the power we give to one person. All good public systems have a properly functioning regulator.

We need to agree as a sector on what we are looking for from ours: what we think good education is and, ultimately, what we think the job of our regulator is. If we can do that together, we can create positive change. As I reflect on in my book, I don't think the 'outstanding' label does anybody any favours, and I think moving to an audit-style system would be a good direction of travel.

Trusts are organisations with an enormous amount of responsibility, and we are also brand new. In the UK, institutions that have stood the test of time stand strong. We have seen how the nation came together to mark the passing of Queen Elizabeth II and this year saw the coronation of King Charles and Queen Camilla with all the tradition and regalia that surrounds such an historic event.

We know the legacy of Queen Elizabeth II. As trust leaders, we also need to think about the legacy and longevity of our trusts. Are we thinking about what our next results are, or are we thinking about where our trust or school will be in 100 years' time? Looking to the new year, I am as determined as ever to keep one priority in mind: is this in the best interests of our children?

Year in review: Primaries

BECKY BLACK
Headteacher, St Andrew's Junior School

We look after more and more, but who looks after us?

Becky Black reflects on a year when long-term disruption by RAAC resulted in a short pause from Ofsted. A parable for the education system as a whole?

I have led St Andrew's for four years. I taught here, became SENCO, deputy and eventually took on headship just a few months before Covid hit. Hand on heart, 2023 has been the most heart-breaking and frustrating year I've ever known.

Our school vision is 'Every child is loved and known, every child shines'. At the end of a grueling 12 months, I feel I should change that to 'Everyone is loved and known, everyone shines'. This year has asked so much of my staff: more responsibility, flexibility, problem-solving, grit and determination than ever before. We are still standing, still laughing and still doing the best we can for our children and their families – but how much more can be asked of us?

With our time in the Ofsted 'window' approaching, we began the year optimistic about post-Covid recovery. I don't measure our performance solely by SATS scores, but also how 'secondary-ready' our children are: their behaviours, attitudes and resilience. All of these were travelling in the right direction as 2023 dawned.

It wasn't without challenge. A growing number of children with high needs are warmly welcomed here, but poor DfE resources and vanishing support from the wider SEND team and educational psychologists make teaching and support staff's roles increasingly difficult. There are all those who should but can't rely on an over-stretched social care system too. Fighting their corner has become a weekly occurrence.

To be blunt, all of the DfE's priorities for the first part of the year felt like a sideshow – bar one.

Suspecting we were in another 'window' due to when the school was built, we were assessed for RAAC in May and June – by the LA and the DfE respectively. Both declared our building safe.

Then, on a sunny Wednesday in August (because the work never ends), our lives turned upside down. I'd been in meetings about fundraising for our swimming pool refurbishment and about replacing our condemned demountable. I was getting ahead of myself with our SDP when my site manager showed me a box of broken concrete blocks from above our ceiling tiles.

A phone call, email and visit from the DfE later, St Andrew's itself was condemned. Our ducks, so perfectly in a row, had been blown out of the water. A whole new level of challenge began, but there was at least some reprieve: our inspection window would be moved to account for the disruption.

> "Our ducks, so perfectly in a row, were blown out of the water

A good thing too. Within a week, we had set up school in a wedding venue, turning ceremony rooms and ball rooms into classrooms, busing children to and from the site and team-teaching whole year groups. Every Thursday evening, we took the school down and put the wedding venue back up. Every Monday morning, we reversed the process.

Eight weeks later, we have adapted to another new environment: relocatable classrooms, outdoor toilets and a much-reduced playground. We are still awaiting our temporary hall, intervention spaces and capacity to provide hot meals.

Buildings (old, temporary and remediation works) now take up 90 per cent of my working week. But the impact on pupils is worse. By the time we get any catch-up funding, it is likely that our most disadvantaged learners will have lost 50 per cent of their school year.

Yet as far as Ofsted is concerned, the disruption is over. SIAMS have deferred inspection until September, but we are back in the Ofsted window. Perhaps last week's coroner's report on the death of Ruth Perry will be enough to cause a rethink. In the meantime, counselling helps – but it should not be this way. The primary education family collectively aches for her family, friends and school community. It also chills us all; we have all had moments when the job was too much.

When Ofsted comes, we'll be ready. But it's clear we need a new way to assess the impact of schools in 2024. I do my job because I love it, but this year has made me stop and reflect: who is looking after us?

Year in review: Secondaries

KEZIAH FEATHERSTONE

Executive headteacher, Q3 Academy Tipton

We'd be in a league of our own if it wasn't for all the foul play

Playing education football on a slanted pitch means lots of goals get scored – but there's only so long 'the opposition' can take a kicking, writes Keziah Featherstone

The year has ended as quietly as it started on the unlevel playing pitch of education football, with schools, teachers and leaders all getting a good kicking.

Festive cheer was not forthcoming from the Centre for Social Justice's inquiry into poverty, reporting catastrophic increases in domestic violence, poor mental health, those on benefits and addictions across the country.

Although shocking, this is unsurprising to those working in schools. We remain on the front lines, always accessible to parents and carers who struggle the most to educate and support their children. Q3 Academy Tipton in the Black Country is no different to the many schools providing free and subsidised uniform, lunches for those not quite meeting the threshold for free school meals, school equipment, bus fares, and now Christmas food hampers and presents for children likely to go without.

Our pastoral staff identified 15 young people for whom not receiving a present was a very real possibility; if that is heart-breaking, so are their wish lists. They haven't asked for top-of-the-range phones or consoles; they've asked for coats, colouring books, beauty basics and chocolate. When the list went out to staff, it was provided five times over within 24 hours. And these are staff who were repeatedly and publicly maligned earlier in the year for taking industrial action over pay.

Managing the strikes was one of many utterly avoidable challenges this year, and all the more frustrating because resolving the dispute didn't seem to be a DfE priority. Doing everything in our power to keep lessons going, particularly for exam years and the most vulnerable, school leaders could barely believe the comments from our union leaders about how negotiations were progressing.

The unsettling impact of industrial action did little to help recover pupil attendance, although in terms of causes it barely scratches the surface. The Centre for Social Justice estimates that severe absence from school has jumped up 134 per cent. Political positions are rife, but solutions are few beyond schools needing to try harder and fining parents more – as if attendance wasn't a top priority for every school leader in spite of having less time, less money and less staff.

Of course, we are more than

> "Political positions are rife, but solutions are few

accustomed to everyone else being experts in how to run schools; we receive guidance, advice, missives and helpful suggestions regularly. Sadly, they often arrive long after the horse has bolted. A case in point: the DfE last released a guidance on AI in March 2023 despite rapid development. Perhaps ChatGPT can help?

And another: guidance on transgender pupils, first promised in 2018, still hasn't materialised. We are told to expect it 'before Christmas', but it has been repeatedly postponed, not least because of legal advice that parts may have been unlawful. Like many other schools, we have a number of transgender students – and have done for a very long time. It really isn't a big deal, and makes very little difference to the safety of our toilets.

The vast majority of young people who question their identify are now fully supported by their parents; when they are not, schools are deft at managing this in a sensitive and appropriate way. But repeated delays cause anxiety: if it's not controversial, why the hold-up? Is this the return of Section 28 for the 21st Century?

Frankly, with all this going on it's unsurprising that Nick Gibb has quit the sector – and evidently the country. With a SEND system struggling to keep up, let alone improve, and the complete collapse of recruitment and retention, people will not only question how the price of a higher PISA ranking has been paid, but whether it can be sustained at all.

But the most traumatic legacy of 2023 will surely be the death of Ruth Perry. Perhaps there is a glimmer of hope, as we head into 2024, that the changing of the guard at Ofsted and a looming general election will bring about deep, radical change to inspection.

At the very least, it's time to account for the reality of the slanted pitch schools are expected to perform on. This isn't football. We can't keep getting a relentless kicking. And we are beyond the point of a motivational pep talk.

Year in review: SEND

SARAH BAKER
CEO, TEAM Education Trust

We can find elegant solutions to our wicked problems

Specialist provision has risen up the political agenda – and risen to its challenges, writes Sarah Baker. But it can't keep doing ever more with ever less

Life in the special sector is always busy. Like a true equilibrium, there are remarkable moments where staff unlock the potential in their students in the most creative ways, but there can also be profound lows. This year, the challenges have been particularly acute, especially around recruitment and retention.

Rising up the charts

2023 has seen inclusion and SEND rise back up the political agenda, with the publication in March of the SEND and AP improvement plan, following exactly 12 months after the green paper, Right support, right place, right time.

Since then, the DfE has announced a £70 million change programme, begun piloting new ways of working to strengthen parent and pupil voice, and released the first phase of SEND capacity reviews in response to issues being highlighted across the sector. There has also been progress around the SEND and AP free school rounds, where finally it feels that if local need is justified, further school places will be created.

While this has all felt very positive, for professionals working in the sector there remain a multitude of questions. For instance, what are the expectations around the new SEND qualification and how will the funding be developed so it is fair?

So far, we have not received enough clarity from the department to reassure us. In addition, while I was pleased to see that the new trust descriptors published in July feature the word 'inclusion', many professionals do not yet feel there is an adequate definition from the department around what it actually means.

> "We owe it to staff to acknowledge they are our biggest asset

Place and space

This year, the state and capacity of school buildings has been a particular challenge, but the way in which trusts and school leaders are working to tackle space issues within buildings has been incredible.

We have all faced pressures from the rising number of consultations for places in special schools, and I have been impressed with the way in which some local authorities are using innovative approaches to address SEND sufficiency.

At TEAM, we have worked closely and creatively with Nottinghamshire local authority to provide satellite provisions and integrated hubs, using mainstream settings to deliver specialist provision. These arrangements bring trusts together to work in partnership with each other and LAs to address place and space capacity. This is a demonstration of true, collaborative inclusion in action, and we look forward to beginning this work with other local authorities in 2024.

Ever more with ever less

Many of these issues directly affect our teachers and support staff. Since the pandemic, our workforce has been forced to become more agile. They are constantly being asked to respond to a wider range of issues and challenges, many of which arise from issues outside of education itself, such as increasing child poverty, and reductions in social services.

In the special sector, our staff are also responding to increasing complexity in the needs of our children and young people. Education is doing what it has always done, and is staffed by exceptional individuals who provide support for young people in the 'here and now', when they need it the most.

However, as a result our staff feel like they are under greater pressure, working harder with fewer resources at their disposal.

I am continually inspired by the teachers and support staff who work tirelessly to meet the needs of our children, families and communities. Every day, they provide stability and security for people whose futures are unclear. We owe it to them to acknowledge that they our biggest asset and top priority and we must be creative with the resources we have immediately available to us and explore how we can work differently to support them.

As we move into 2024, there is hope for the sector that its place at the heart of an effective education system is being recognised. If we continue to work collaboratively, share our expertise and think bigger than our own school or trust, I believe we will continue to find elegant solutions to the wicked problems we are faced with today.

Year in review: Governance

EDWARD VITALIS
Trustee, The Great Schools Trust

The recruitment crisis has now reached the boardroom

2023 will go down as the year that the recruitment and retention crisis brought school governance itself to breaking point, writes Edward Vitalis

This year brought so many significant governance challenges that it's hard to know where to begin. The best thing may be to start at the end, with a crisis that is peaking as the year comes to a close.

Breaking point

Governors and trustees make up the largest voluntary workforce in the UK. Sadly, a growing number are throwing in the towel and fewer are joining in the face of growing workload.

Recruitment and retention of governors and trustees first became a real challenge post-pandemic. Covid caused colleagues to reflect on what mattered most to them and to prioritise their own wellbeing, perhaps in a way they hadn't before. Simultaneously, increased demand on schools caused an increase in the workloads of those who remained. These trends have continued.

In November, the National Governance Association (NGA) published a report taking stock of governance workload. It found that over one-quarter of all governance volunteers and one-third of chairs are contemplating resigning, with time and pressure cited as the main drivers.

This has been fueled by increased numbers of exclusions, a rise in the number and complexity of complaints, wider systemic challenges including funding pressures and staffing, and a growing expectation of schools to support families also suffering with mental health, poverty and more.

Addressing these challenges is not only time-consuming but emotionally and mentally exhausting. The commitment required of this volunteer workforce is reaching breaking point.

Strike and counter-strike

It's not only governors who feel this way. In February, 54 per cent of schools were closed or partially closed due to industrial action. But of course, this only added to governor workloads.

Headteachers are required to consult with their governing boards before deciding whether to close. NGA provided guidance to governing boards, and the DFE updated theirs, but to many this felt like more to absorb in their increasingly challenging role.

Nor is it the end. In response to what was over 10 days of strikes, the government is now consulting on the introduction of minimum service levels in schools. Should it pass, it's not clear that it'll improve anything for heads of their governing bodies. And in the meantime, we may well see yet more disruption.

> "The commitment required is reaching breaking point

SEND and AP improvement

Sadly, there is no indication of abatement in other pressures either. During my recent tenure as chair of Greater Manchester's children and adolescent mental health services commissioning committee, I witnessed the steep rise in referrals for children with diagnoses of autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions.

Here, at least, the SEND and AP improvement plan published in March is having some impact. In our region, we have seen an increase in the number of special schools, and mainstream provision is reforming to adopt specialist approaches – and indeed so are governors and trustees.

I have personally engaged in the oversight of one specialist secondary school, the transformation of two primaries from mainstream into mainstream/specialist and further expansion of resource provision elsewhere.

In truth, however, even all this great work is unlikely to be enough in the short term.

Estate of disrepair

And as if things weren't challenging enough already, the start of the school year brought another crisis as RAAC brought the state of the education estate to national attention. A daily onslaught of direction and guidance reminiscent of the pandemic itself took over our email inboxes.

At best, governors and trustees were forced to undergo a stress-inducing comms onslaught while supporting school leaders to (re-) assess their schools. At worst, they have been cast right back to that pandemic peak of no-notice school closures – but with the added pressure of finding and setting up alternative accommodation quickly to limit the impact on already struggling families who, this time, are not furloughed or working from home.

I haven't even mentioned what was meant to be a seminal piece of work from DfE this year: the the regulatory and commissioning review published in March that was supposed to improve accountability for academies.

Nor the fact that, in the wake of the death of Ruth Perry, Ofsted seemed to try to deflect responsibility for the headteacher's failing mental health on Caversham's governors.

Is it any wonder fewer feel they can be governors and look after themselves, let alone serve their children, schools and communities well?

HEADLINE PARTNER

AQA

Questions matter

The 14th annual

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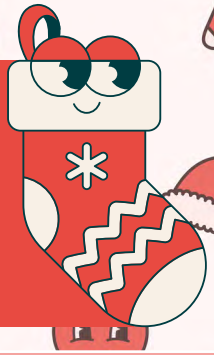
Books for Christmas!

8 new edu books to buy colleagues (or yourself) for Christmas



For classroom optimisers

What Teachers Need to Know About Memory

ByJonathan Firth and Nasima Riazat
December 2023
SAGE

This practical guide aims to support teachers' reflection on, and engagement with, memory in the classroom, with direct links to their own teaching – promising to help achieve the holy trinity of classroom practice: enhance learning, reduce workload, boost outcomes. Christmas all wrapped up for the busy teacher in your life (even if that's you).

For classroom optimisers

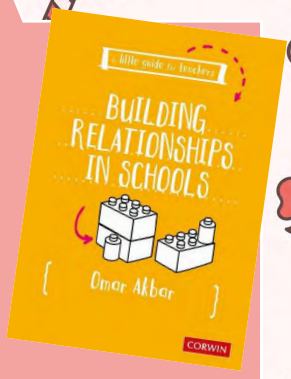
Building Your Inclusive Classroom: A Toolkit for Adaptive Teaching and Relational Practice

By Verity Lush
December 2023
Routledge

Given the well-documented rise in the needs among young people, what could be more useful that an accessible toolkit of ideas, methods and motivation to enable teachers to make their classrooms fully inclusive? With evidence-based approaches reaching beyond polarised debates to include relational, restorative practice and traditional methods, it could be just the thing to SEND a busy teacher.

For culture builders

A Little Guide for Teachers: Building Relationships in Schools



By Omar Akbar
SAGE

A recurring theme this year has been the broken contract between schools and their communities. Behaviour is worse. Attendance is seen as optional. Parental complaints are up. In that context, which educator wouldn't want a little guide with "everything you need to know about relationship building with students, support staff, stakeholders and parents"?

For culture builders

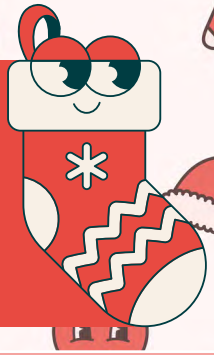
School Staff Culture: Knowledge-building, Reflection and Action

ByRuth Ashbee
December 2023
Routledge

Professional development and school culture are often cited as a remedy to the recruitment and retention crisis. Drawing on key ideas from systems theory, psychology, anthropology, business and philosophy, Ruth Ashbee sets out to offer concrete steps to get this right in practice. And with a free school development package to boot, it's Christmas come... not a minute too soon.

Books for Christmas!

8 new edu books to buy colleagues (or yourself) for Christmas



For primary professionals

The Practical Guide to Getting Subject Leaders to THRIVE!

By Sebastian Olway
December 2023
John Catt

Two key challenges that have consistently been raised by primaries this year have been the size of the curriculum and Ofsted's expectations of curriculum leadership, particularly in small schools. Here, Sebastian Olway proposes to tackle these issues head-on with a framework rooted in educational research and containing strategies, tips and resources for individual subject leaders or whole-staff CPD. It could be the gift that keeps on giving.

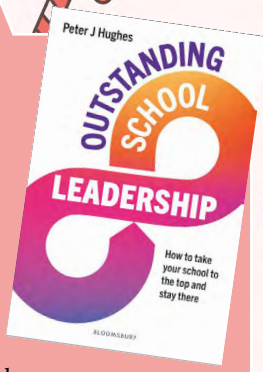
For primary professionals

As We Begin: Dispositions of Mind, Learning, and the Brain in Early Childhood

By Tia Henteleff
December 2023
John Catt

Another key challenge in primaries is the growing number of children arriving in Reception class who are not school-ready – drawing greater attention to the crucial value of the early years. *As We Begin* brings together insights from big thinkers in education and other fields along with the author's own experiences in the classroom to offer ideas, rather than prescriptions, for a balanced early childhood educational program.

For standard raisers

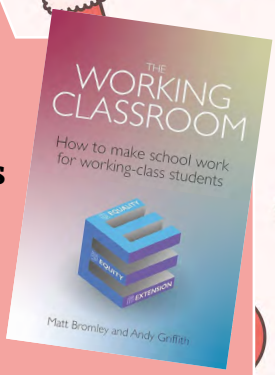


Outstanding School Leadership: How to take your school to the top and stay there

By Peter J Hughes
December 2023
Bloomsbury

Mossbourne Federation CEO, Peter Hughes reflects on his career to offer up a blueprint for successful leadership. From recruitment to improving attainment, being mission-driven to knowing when to take risks, the book provides a replicable framework of support for leaders, with practical tips and proven examples of best practice. Whether or not 'outstanding' remains a label, no doubt every leader and aspirant to leadership will value its insights.

For standard raisers



The Working Classroom: How to make school work for working-class students

By Matt Bromley, Andy Griffith
November 2023
Crown House

This week's IFS and Centre for Social Justice reports lay bare the state of inequality across the nation and in education. *The Working Classroom* focuses on actions within the control of teachers and school leaders which will ensure that we create a socially just education system – with useful methods to improve the cultural capital of students that build on the rich heritage of the working class, rather than seeing their background as a weakness. What could be more Christmas-spirited than that?

THE YEAR'S CONVERSATION HOT TOPICS 2023

ROB GASSON JESS MAHDAVI-GLADWELL SARAH GALLAGHER SONIA THOMPSON

Our regular reviewers pick their top blogs and podcasts from a year of outstanding educational content

FIXING THE SHAPE SORTER

Rob Gasson

My podcast of the year has to be this episode of the D.I.I.verse podcast, in which hosts Adam Vasco and Julian Gwinnett interview Square Pegs co-author, Ellie Costello about inclusion, compassion and fitting in. The whole conversation is a passionate review of what schools need to do differently to meet all pupils' needs, but also an insightful discussion about why the topic so often leads to polarised debate.

Costello explores the idea that the defensiveness is rooted in a "shame and blame" culture, which really resonates with me and which I see writ large across the education landscape, from out high-stakes accountability system through to the "shield of shame" that exists among pupils, particularly those who are most likely to fail.

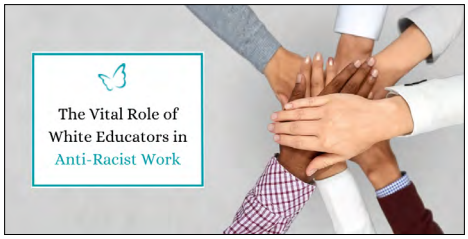
Her many-faceted solutions all stem from dispelling with the tyranny of meritocracy, an approach I know many leaders invested in improving outcomes for our most vulnerable will share. So should everyone interested in an education system fit for all.

BEING A BETTER ALLY

Jess Madhavi-Gladwell

Timing prevented me from including this blog in my The Conversation this year. However, timing also meant that this blog was particularly poignant for me.

It was published just after I attended a panel discussion organised by Amanda Wilson with contributors to her latest book, *Letters to a young generation*. During the discussion, I was struck by being one of a small number of non-Black attendees. Though unusual for me, the experience of minority is one faced by panellists and other Black leaders and teachers on a regular basis.



This blog on the Integrity Coaching website on understanding whiteness as a social construct, though not unfamiliar territory for me, reaffirmed my sense that my school leadership role puts me in a position to move the dial.

As the new year looms, my commitment "to consciously address the invisibility of whiteness" to bring about meaningful action as an effective ally is stronger than ever.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Sarah Gallagher

Brian Walton goes by 'Old Primary Head' on social media, but it turns out I've taught for a year longer than him. Does that make me 'Ancient Primary Head'? Anyway, the most impactful blogs and podcasts for me this year have been those concerned with Ofsted.

I do wonder what we're doing to ourselves as a profession. This isn't one of those, but I've chosen it as my conversation of the year because it manages to sum up lots of other key topics of 2023.

With my many hats, it has been increasingly clear over the year that the same issues are manifesting across the system, from ITT through to headship. I try to focus my entries for this column on wellbeing for heads, but it's clear that the problem is pervasive and urgent. Here, Walton offers his top three thoughts for easing the burden: keeping it simple, recognising the 'leaders' in our organisations 'leadershit' when it manifests, and taking responsibility for taking care of ourselves. There's plenty there to encourage anyone to keep the faith at the end of a long, hard year.

AN EDU CHRISTMAS CAROL

Sonia Thompson

I love to read blogs by other headteachers (in this case, an executive head), and Simon Botten, who goes by @Southgloshead on X, consistently writes posts that resonate with me. I definitely could have written *Bear School Leadership Lessons* (particularly point two, 'Scrub the floors') and his thoughts on leadership life often get me thinking – which is what a good blog should do. If you find your way to my blog of the year, do explore his other articles.

His best this year arguably comes at the

last with this storming blog post, *How Did We End Up Here?* – a masterclass in the type of analytical thoroughness you'd expect from an investigative journalist. It blew up on edu-socials, and rightly so.

I loved the chance to reminisce on times past, but rather than stop in the present and wallow in the negatives, there is hope and optimism for our profession here too. Nothing as obvious as being visited by three DfE ghosts, but in what feels like beleaguered time it's a breath of fresh air.

Click the links to access the blogs and podcasts

COP28: Sustainability in education 2023

The Knowledge

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

Are teacher commutes getting any greener?

Iain Ford, Senior data and reporting analyst, Teacher Tapp

There is perhaps no teacher commute more unique than a Teacher Tapp respondent who told us about taking a light aircraft to island hop to their school.

But even among more usual commuters teachers are relatively unique. This is mainly thanks to schools' less traditional locations, often outside of town and city centres and not always in the ideal spot for good public transport links.

Furthermore, teachers are often laden with books and resources which make hauling over long distances on a bike or bus difficult. As a result, many teachers use the car; a Teacher Tapp survey back in 2021 revealed that 83 per cent of teachers commute this way.

Of course, lots of things have changed since 2021. An ever-increasing focus on environmental concerns, the scaling-up of flexible work and a supposed 'AI revolution', to name just a few. Any number of these may drastically alter teachers' transport preferences. So, what's changed in two years? To find out, Teacher Tapp polled over 10,000 teachers on their daily commute to see the differences between 2021 and 2023.

One of the least surprising findings is that the distances teachers are travelling have remained largely unchanged in two years. However, the time taken by a teacher to get to school has increased. Back in 2021, many workers were still opting for home-working over office-based work, but a gradual return to the office for many workers since then means more congestion on the roads.

As a result, many teachers say their commutes are taking longer. They have increased by an average of a minute each way, and while that doesn't seem much, it quickly adds up. Over the course of a year, that's an extra six and a half hours in the car – neither working nor enjoying quality time.

The cost of commuting has risen as well. Rising fuel prices alongside more expensive public transport have caused teachers to be paying on average £20 more per month on travel costs than in 2021. In effect, teachers are £240 a year worse off before even leaving the house.

'It's a uniquely difficult set of behaviours to shift'

However, the additional commuting time and expense don't appear to have dented car usage among teachers, further highlighting how unfeasible other modes of transport really are for this group of professionals. In 2023, 84 per cent of teachers say they commute to work by car – one per cent more than in 2021 (from a larger sample).

Meanwhile, the proportion using an electric alternative has increased from five percent two years ago to eight per cent today. This change reflects wider societal change, but it is helped no end by the increase in schools providing green car schemes (up from 1 to 3 per cent) and electric changing points on site (doubled to six per cent).

Other incentives that schools offer include cycle-to-work schemes, which continue to prove the most popular travel initiative offered by schools. Thirty per cent of schools offer a way to buy a bike cheaply, but the percentage that do so has remained unchanged for the past two years, further highlighting that cycling is unsuitable for many.

In fact, teachers who cycle make up just three per cent of commutes, unchanged since 2021. Many more prefer to walk. Furthermore, we know public transport isn't suitable for the masses. Even in London, just 18 per cent take the train or tube each day. This results in little incentive for schools to offer season ticket loans for public transport, which only seven per cent of London schools (and practically no others) do.

Looking back two years, it would be easy to focus on the fact that little has changed – but it's a uniquely difficult set of behaviours to shift given the physical realities of the profession. In that context, it's perhaps best to focus on where change is happening.

The increase in the adoption of electric vehicles and schools' provision of the infrastructure for that is particularly encouraging in that regard. Another doubling over the next two years would start to look like a trend. And of course, the more who make the transition, the easier it will be for others to follow.

A festive activity for problem-solving pupils

GCHQ

GCHQ's 17th director, Anne Keast-Butler reveals the agency's third - and her first - #GCHQChristmasChallenge. This year's comes with a bonus maths-based puzzle to reflect her passion for the subject. Secondary classes are encouraged to work as a team to crack the challenge. Just print and use in class, or register your school here for a full teaching pack, hints and solutions: **http://bit.ly/3GDZL8x**

GCHQ

PRINT OUT FOR YOUR PUPILS

GCHQ | FESTIVE CHALLENGE

The GCHQ Christmas Challenge

The seven questions below each have a one-word answer which can follow 'Christmas'.

Use the design of the card to help you to put letters from your answers into the grid below to find the final answer.

1

These clocks show a four-letter word. Can you work it out?

2

Can you solve this riddle?

What breaks but cannot fall,
can leap but never crawl,
can be seized but never gripped,
often present, never skipped?

3

We've jumbled up our gift tags! Split them into three groups of three and find a word that links each group.

What word links these three link words?

4

Each letter represents a different digit:

MI x MI = MAA
TI + TI = RA
DO - SO + TI - MI = RE
RE x RE = ?

5

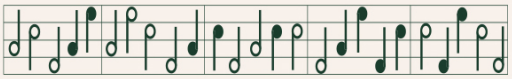
Find the pairs of letters which come next in each sequence:

TH, RD, ND, ??
ET, EL, PM, ??
WU, SQ, OM, ??
WR, AP, PI, ??

6

We found a scrap of paper with some bars of music on it which we think are concealing a word.

Next to the music were some 1s and 0s, and the numbers 16,8,4,2,1. Can you work out the hidden word?



7

Look at this message. Can you work it out and find the secret 4-letter word?

Agklq ldhum qom ndem.

Gembqgax c 4-hmqqmk vdke.

Hddp mumkxvomkm.

Ycxim gq'l umkx diugdsl.

Can you solve the final challenge below?

Follow us or scan the QR code to find the answers soon.

@GCHQ
@GCHQ

PRINT OUT FOR YOUR PUPILS

The GCHQ Christmas Challenge

The Christmas card has 7 puzzles.
4 are of prime importance,
and 2 are boringly conventional.

How many sides has the other one?

Follow us on our social media channels for the full challenge!

@GCHQ @GCHQ

PRINT OUT FOR YOUR PUPILS

Week in Westminster

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

FRIDAY

A new report "Building school and trust business professional capability" includes lots of interesting information and government promises of support.

For instance, it pledges to "work with sector organisations to support a new, growing body of evidence and research into what works well in school and academy trust business and finance practices and capability building".

All sounds good – but we're not sure how much training will help when there simply isn't enough funding.

PoliticsHome reported this week that the financial state of local authority-maintained schools is worsening, with those in deficit now more than £10,000 in the red.

Taking the surplus and deficit of all the maintained schools that responded to a freedom of information request together, the sector went from a total £119 million in-year surplus in 2021-22 to a £90 million in-year deficit in 2022-23.

But yes, more training please!

TUESDAY

Ofqual research today tells us that the carbon footprint of a pupil sitting a GCSE English language exam in 2022 was 5.64 kg CO_2e.

That's the equivalent to 1.82km driven by an average three-door petrol car or five-and-a-quarter wash cycles at 60degC.

The research comes as everyone is eyeing digital exams. So can they help? Not quite.

The biggest contributor is the energy used for a pupil to travel to and from school, and the electricity used to light the exam hall.

The report added: "Increased digital delivery would change the character of carbon emissions – replacing paper-based emissions with electrical equipment manufacture and energy consumption – but it is difficult to estimate whether or not it would reduce, or even increase, emissions.

"Location of exams, whether paper or digital, would remain the main factor in determining emissions."

***

Schools minister Damian Hinds was questioned on teacher recruitment by education committee MPs today.

When asked what's being done to promote teacher recruitment in subjects that don't carry a bursary, he pointed out that broader advertising is not subject-specific and is focused on that "vocation that many people feel. That's probably the single most important thing."

But he added: "I should stress there are a significant number of subjects that attract additional incentives. For those that don't, we're largely attracting the numbers of high-quality, talented candidates already that are required to fill those places."

Ermmm, we don't think so Damo.

Of the eight subjects that didn't have a bursary in 2023, just three met their recruitment target this year (classics, PE and history).

The other five all missed, including business studies, which recruited just 16 per cent (!) of its target.

THURSDAY

An embargoed press release from the DfE today signalled "consultation launched to shape the development of the new Advanced British Standard as part of the prime minister's priority to deliver a world class education".

Newspapers ran with the headline at 12.01am (as per the midnight embargo) leaving readers scratching their heads until the government decided to *actually* publish the consultation at 9.30am.

Today also marked the return of primary school results, with eager parents logging on to the government's "compare the performance of schools" website.

But they were disappointed. The service was "unavailable" and they were told to come back later.

***

The consultation has little more detail than what has already been announced – and conveniently swerves the key conundrum of how ministers plan to recruit more teachers to deliver more post-16 education.

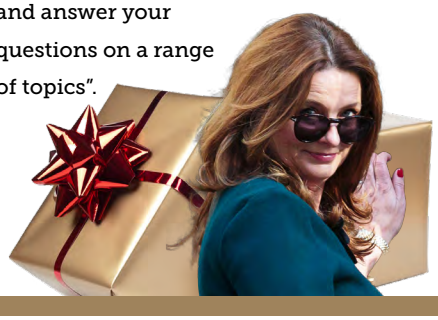
But we did get an all-important reminder from Gillian Keegz about her career before Parliament (bingo dabbers at the ready).

"My experience in business affirmed the age-old saying: the only constant is change. It is vital therefore that our education system is set up to support the future success of the country."

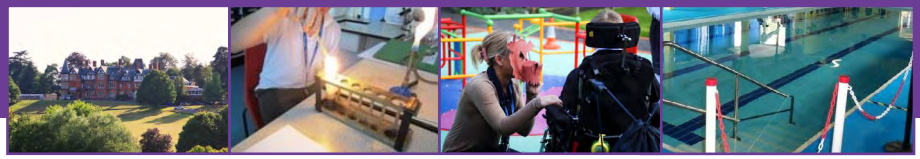
***

In a 'thank you' email to the sector today, Keegz gave us the Xmas present we've all been dreaming of: regular live online sessions with the education secretary!

She invites the sector to join her for the session, at 4pm on January 16, adding "I hope to see as many of you as possible to update you on my focus for the coming term, hear from you on your priorities and answer your questions on a range of topics".



Valence School
enabling independence



PRINCIPAL

Leadership Group 6: £81,561-£102,376 plus non-residential allowance £13,102 gross p.a.

Full Time - Permanent - September 2024

- Are you committed to the highest achievement for all and champion inclusion and diversity?
- Are you a strong strategic leader with great empathy and moral direction, leading by example?
- Do you have an open-minded, creative and solution-focused attitude?

If so, we have a unique key influential post that will provide you with a fantastic opportunity to develop our school and achieve our vision.

Valence School is a KCC Foundation residential and day Special School for children and young people with physical disabilities, complex medical needs and associated learning and communication difficulties. We are part of the Kent Special Educational Needs Trust (KsENT) and have over 200 staff providing specialist teaching, social care, therapies and nursing care to an exceptionally high standard.

We are looking for an inspirational and ambitious leader who has the vision, drive, resilience, experience and personality to oversee the continuing development of the school and build on the strong foundations, laid by our existing Principal who is retiring.

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).

Woodland Academy Trust

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.

Application Closing Date: 17th December 2023

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

THE CAM ACADEMY TRUST

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.