

# SCHOOLS WEEK

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

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- Council top slices to fill high needs holes are up four-fold since Covid
- Cash seized despite huge government bailouts as LA finances worsen
- 'Funding is insufficient, system under huge strain and isn't working'

SAMANTHA BOOTH | @SAMANTHAJBOOTH

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# SCHOOLS WEEK

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# Schools can't be left to shoulder PFI contract exit storm

Schools Week has long chronicled the problems faced by leaders running schools built under private finance initiative (PFI) contracts.

You would think many would be pleased about the contracts now starting to end – meaning buildings will be passed back into public hands.

But, as with much of the finer details of these complicated contracts, it turns out there's a sting in the tail.

Extracting school buildings from private firms is so complicated that the government recommend councils start planning seven years in advance.

But the hollowing out of council expertise and personnel means many are now scrabbling around to ensure schools are handed over in the ship-shape they were promised.

As we reveal (page 5 and 6), hardly any councils are up to speed with what needs to be done to ensure schools aren't left exposed. Some are only just properly getting to grips with the exit process with just 12 months or so before deals end.

Most frustratingly for schools, as PFI expert Ian Denison points out: "The party with the least ability to influence the status of expiry is the one that's going to pick up all the consequential impact."

While the government has set up a PFI centre of excellence unit, its reach must be expanded to ensure that firms don't fleece the taxpayer even more.

Elsewhere this week, we have another reminder about just how unsustainable SEND funding is (page 4). Councils with huge high needs budgets are raiding millions from schools budgets – with government approval – to fill deficits, despite also getting huge government bailouts.

It's totally unsustainable, and the next government must make solving the issue one of its first tasks.

Meanwhile, Ofsted has said it is looking at all options to make becoming an inspector more attractive as their staff are nicked by academy trusts, and fewer people than ever want to join the inspectorate (page 8).

## Most read online this week:

- 1 [History's repetitions offer hope over pay and conditions](#)
- 2 [Headteacher unfairly sacked after 'tapping' her son's hand](#)
- 3 [Keegan: 'I'd have punched Ofsted inspector'](#)
- 4 [Trust rejects claims from head who resigned over 'high' top slice](#)
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# Councils raid £67m from school budgets to fill high needs holes

SAMANTHA BOOTH

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EXCLUSIVE

More than 20 councils have been given ministerial approval to quietly slice £67 million from their schools budget to prop up gaping SEND funding black holes.

For the first time in recent years, every council that asked for approval was given the green light to move millions between the core schools and high needs funding pots.

Four years ago, nine in 10 applications from councils were rejected – reflecting the worsening state of council finances.

Geoff Barton, general secretary at the ASCL school leaders' union, said: "We're left with a situation of robbing Peter to pay Paul, of moving money between inadequate budgets in a system where there is simply insufficient funding to meet the level of need."

If councils wish to transfer more than 0.5 per cent, or want to move 0.5 per cent or less of their core schools budget without agreement from their schools forum, they must get approval from the Department for Education.

For 2024-25, the government approved £67 million worth of transfers from 23 councils (see table below), figures obtained after a freedom of information request by Schools Week show. This compares with at most £17 million from the three councils given approval in 2020-21.

It means the government has allowed £190 million to be sliced from school budgets by councils over the past five years.

Barton said that the transfers were "a reflection of a system that is under enormous strain and isn't working as it should".

Most of the councils who applied for transfers in 2024-25 were those who have high needs deficits. Fourteen are taking part in the government's "safety valve" bailout programme, while six are in the "delivering better value in SEND" scheme.

Only two – Calderdale and Staffordshire – are not part of a government programme to get their high needs deficits under control.

Norfolk will transfer 1.5 per cent, or £9.5 million, of its schools' budget next year. A council spokesperson said the transfers were "a key part" of its six-year "safety valve" deal agreed with the DfE, which includes a £70 million government bailout.



## Councils slice more of their schools budget

2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	TOTAL
£19.7m	£39.2m	£50.4m	£67.3m	£189m

While it is taking money from schools, "a far greater amount of funding flows back into mainstream schools", the council claimed.

Six years of transfers would total £64 million, the spokesperson said. But £309 million will go into mainstream schools through a combination of extra top-up funding, increased specialist resource base provision and new "school and community teams" focused on SEN support pupils.

The next largest transfer was in Kent, where the council will slice 1.2 per cent, or £15 million, from its schools.

Frazer Westmorland, headteacher at Mundella Primary School in Folkestone, said the needs of pupils had increased since Covid, meaning any "reduction in funding directly to schools is going to have a double impact".

North Somerset council said it had the "full support" of its schools to transfer 1 per cent, which equates to £1.6 million.

"Schools have needed to absorb a range of additional costs in recent years, so it is a mark of the strength of our relationship with them that they have felt able to agree to this," a spokesperson added.

Hammersmith and Fulham council will transfer 1 per cent, equivalent to £1.2 million. A draft submission for its application to the government said a key driver was to "address budget pressure from cost inflation" after signing off its safety

valve agreement.

The council also warned of "lower than originally forecast" high needs funding increases.

Stephen Kingdom, campaign manager for the Disabled Children's Partnership, said transfers create a "vicious circle", adding: "It is children who are losing out. The government needs to properly fund the whole system."

In a debate on SEND funding in the Commons this week, Robin Walker, the education select committee chair, warned "we have to acknowledge that producing ever more help to manage the level of deficits isn't a sustainable solution and that investment is required to clear or remove them".

The NAHT union has also called this week for the government to write off all council high needs deficits, which currently sit at £1.6 billion.

In total, 34 councils have signed "safety valve" deals where they have been given bailouts totalling £1 billion in exchange for strict conditions to cut costs. Another six councils are in talks to join the scheme.

A spokesperson for the County Councils Network said it was "clear that the present special educational needs and disabilities system is buckling under the strain of yearly increases in demand".

The DfE has been approached for comment.

## INVESTIGATION: PFI

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

## Warning sounded as schools not ready to exit PFI deals

JACK DYSON

@JACKDYDS

EXCLUSIVE

Just two of the 41 councils given “health checks” by the government over their preparedness to exit private finance initiative (PFI) school deals were deemed to be on track, *Schools Week* can reveal.

Sector leaders fear schools will be left to “shoulder the storm” of councils not being ready to take back public control of the schools, as contracts start to come to an end.

In one case, a secondary school facing a £1 million “bullet payment” to get rid of its PFI contractor has written to ministers asking for help to foot the bill.

**‘Major work’ still needed**

Successive governments have used PFI to fund new schools since the late 1990s. Private firms build and maintain sites in exchange for mortgage-style payments normally over 25-year contracts – which rise beyond inflation – before handing them over to taxpayers.

In 2021, the Cabinet Office started running health checks on contracts set to expire in less than seven years, the point at which authorities are told to start their preparations.

Officials use the assessments to help councils “improve their readiness” and identify projects that may require more support from the Infrastructure Projects Authority.

But our freedom of information request shows that, of the 41 checks completed in the schools sector, eight (19.5 per cent) were rated “amber/red”, meaning “major” additional work is needed.

Another 18 (44 per cent) were “amber”, meaning “moderate” work was still required. Just two were rated “green”, meaning they were “at target readiness given the time to expiry”.

Julia Harnden, a funding specialist for school leaders’ union ASCL, said: “On an administrative level, the length of time that has passed since these contracts were signed and the shrinking capacity at local authority level, as a result of funding cuts from central government, are providing further complications for schools.

“It is a perfect storm and ...



Julia Harnden



schools should not be having to shoulder this risk.”

Local authorities often negotiate exits on behalf of schools.

**‘Shrinking’ council capacity**

Ian Denison, the director of PFI consultancy Inscyte, said this leaves schools’ fates in the hands of others. “The party with the least ability to influence the status of expiry is the one that’s going to pick up all the consequential impact,” he explained.

The first PFI school to reach the end of its contract was handed back last year. The second, Barnhill Community High School in west London, will come into public ownership in September.

Middlesex Learning Partnership Trust CEO Ben Spinks, whose chain runs the secondary, said that negotiations, which began in 2019, with PFI operator Bellrock were ongoing.

He stressed that “all of the parties are genuinely trying to work through this constructively”, with the final set of site surveys completed last month.

Despite this, Spinks fears that large chunks of his budget will be swallowed up by a £1 million “bullet payment”, should the trust replace Bellrock as

facilities manager.

“We’re making the moral argument that we should be assisted in making the payment because we are, to the best of our knowledge, the only PFI school that has such a condition attached to it.

“The impact will be substantial. It impacts the educational opportunities we can provide our young people.”

Accounts show that the three-school trust’s free reserves stood at £1.04 million in August. Spinks estimated that the payment “roughly equates to two years’ pupil premium funding”.

**Surveys still not completed**

In Stoke, which has the largest school PFI contract in the country, city council chiefs are negotiating the expiry terms for 88 schools before their contract ends next October.

One leader said the lack of certainty around the arrangements has left them feeling “nervous” about how it will impact their bottom line.

“We feel, with these big private organisations, schools and trusts are just quite small in comparison,” they added.

A confidential meeting was held by the city council last month to discuss contract expiry obligations. Denison has since begun talks with some of the schools.

Continued on next page

## INVESTIGATION: PFI

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He believes that some work needed to take place before the end of the contract is “never going to happen” as surveys on the buildings have not yet been completed. PFI schools are expected to be handed back in good condition.

“Unless you start in year seven all the way through to expiry, you’ll never get the investment into the school that you need to get the estate to reach the standard it should,” Denison said. “The only party that benefits by dragging expiry into a later stage is the [PFI firm].”

Sheffield schools forum documents, released in December, show it has established a “project team” to manage the expiry of three separate contracts. The first will end in 2026.

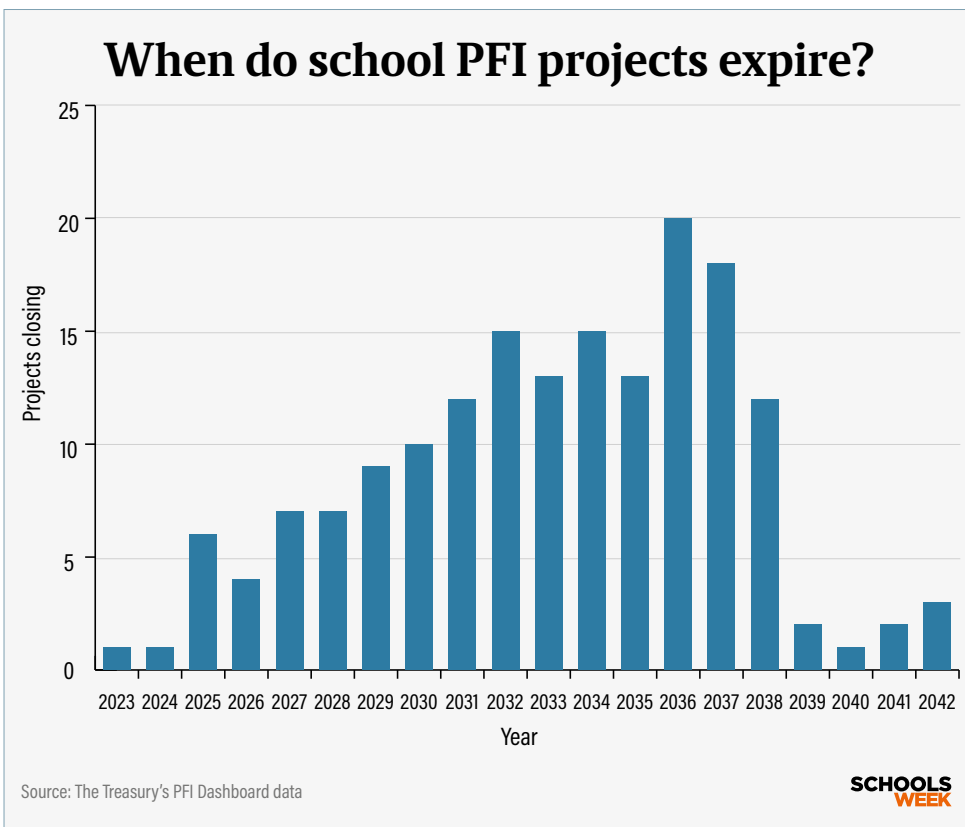
And in Calderdale, authority papers from last February stated that it was unlike most councils, which “employ an officer with a dedicated role for management of PFI, Calderdale does not. This now needs to be reconsidered”.

“It is seven years to the expiry of the PFI contract. This is a critical time for the authority and for those schools ... to be planning for life after PFI. This is a huge undertaking.”

In all, there are 172 PFI school projects in England. Just two will have reached the end of their contracts by the end of 2024. A further 43 will come to a close over the next six years.

The total capital value of the primaries and secondaries built under the agreements stands at £8.5 billion, while the amount that schools will pay the private firms is estimated to be more than £32.7 billion in total.

The Treasury has published finance details for a handful of PFI contracts. They show



shareholders across just five schools projects will rake in £35 million in dividends over the course of the contracts.

In a report published in 2020, the NAO noted that councils “may not be incentivised ... to manage the expiry process effectively, knowing they will not retain ownership”. Those with a single PFI deal lack capacity or expertise for expiry talks, it added.

The government stressed that the Infrastructure Projects Authority “is already working with a large number of local authorities to ensure they get value for money from their schools contracts”.

Vercity Management Services Ltd, the firm listed as Transform Schools (Stoke) Limited’s secretary on Companies House, and Bellrock have been contacted for comment.

## Preparing to leave a PFI contract? What you need to know

Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) guidance said “effective management of the expiry process ... [is] essential to help protect value for money and ensure the continuity of vital public services”.

Councils “should not simply devolve management of the PFI contract expiry process onto an operational contract management team”.

Instead, ongoing senior leadership will be needed to provide decision-making and governance, allocate budgets and involve additional staff.

IPA believes planning should start “at least seven years before” the contract’s end date.

At this point authorities need to “understand the exit provisions and requirements”, as well as the condition of the buildings.

Over the next two years they are expected to engage with the PFI to initiate joint planning, develop their strategy for future services and start early condition surveys.

Final asset surveys and remediation should then be

delivered in the three years before handover to ensure the school is handed back in an appropriate condition.

Future services must also be procured at this point, along with reviews and transfers of data.

At the end of the agreement, “all handback certification” should be completed, with accounts finalised and residual contract issues closed.



NEWS: RECRUITMENT

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# Flagship institute hits recruitment target – with a little help from its friends

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EXCLUSIVE

Recruits from teacher training providers who have partnered with the National Institute of Teaching (NioT) will count towards the flagship organisation’s recruitment targets.

The institute has been billed as England’s “flagship teacher training and development provider”, backed by a government contract of up to £121 million. Although just £5 million of this is for running the institute, with £6 million for research.

The rest is to fund recruits for the training programmes it offers, similar to other providers - and a lot will also be funded by ITT trainees.

Set up by four academy trusts, NioT recruited 502 trainees for this year, its first year of delivery – hitting its 500 target.

But it has emerged recruits from two of its founders Harris Federation and Star Academies – who were already teacher training providers – actually counted towards NioT’s recruitment figures last year.

Another two teacher training providers have also paused their accreditation to become lead partners with the institute, meaning their recruits will also count as NioT’s.

James Noble-Rogers, executive director of the Universities Council for the Education of Teacher,



said: “One of the justifications for investing large amounts of public money in the NioT was that it would lead to a net increase in recruitment.

“This clearly won’t happen if they rely on recruiting student teachers who would otherwise have gone to other providers.

“Reassurances were also given that it would complement, rather than compete, with existing high-quality provision. I will be very worried if that turns out not to be the case.”

Harris and Star recruited 222 trainees for the year before NioT was established – suggesting a huge chunk of its trainees for this year would likely have been recruited by the trusts anyway.

But NioT said it was always the plan for Harris and Star’s recruits to count as its own, as they are its founding members.

Emma Rennison, NioT’s executive director of partnerships, added they had “doubled the expected numbers from our founding SCITTs – and



Emma Rennison

we are making a meaningful impact on ‘who’ we are reaching and ‘where’ we are making a difference.”

The Alban Federation has also become a lead partner at the institute, and Shelley College will partner with both NioT and the Ambition Institute.

Accredited providers have “full and final accountability for all aspects of training design, delivery, and quality across the partnership”, DfE guidance states.

While lead partners “have an operational or strategic role with responsibilities such as trainee recruitment, delivering training, involvement in curriculum design (and) supplying lead mentors”.

NioT’s recruitment target for this year is 1,000 trainees. In the 2023-24 academic year, Alban Federation SCITT had 32 recruits and Shelley College’s Kirklees and Calderdale SCITT had 40.

Lucy Sykes, director of the Calderdale and Kirklees Teaching School Hub, said one of its “strategic partners” is an associate college of the institute so it “made sense to pursue this route.

“Our first year of this partnership has been very successful, so it made sense to place our accreditation in dormancy, to build on this great start over the next few years.”

Rennison added: “Schools need more expertly-trained teachers, and (NioT) wants to work with the sector to rise to this challenge. At the same time as recruiting to our own teaching programmes, we are supporting other teacher educators through our research function.”

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## Unions ‘astonished’ as DfE cuts teacher recruitment targets

The Department for Education has slashed its secondary school teacher recruitment targets by almost a tenth, despite missing them by 50 per cent last year.

The government sets targets annually against which recruitment is assessed. This week’s figures show it needs to recruit 23,955 to secondary postgraduate teacher training in September, down 2,405, or 9.1 per cent, on its target for 2023.

The DfE said the decrease was “driven by more favourable supply forecasts”.

“For example, recruitment forecasts for both returners and teachers that are new to the state-funded sector are more favourable for almost all subjects this year.”

It added that, while “secondary pupil numbers are still growing, they are now growing more

slowly; in advance of peaking around 2025-26”.

“This has acted to reduce the rate at which the workforce needs to grow and has helped lead to this year’s lower secondary target.”

Meanwhile, the primary target has been revised up by 2.4 per cent from 9,180 to 9,400, despite falling primary pupil numbers nationally.

“This slightly increased primary target, despite falling pupil numbers, is principally a result of less favourable retention forecasts this year,” the DfE summary adds.

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the NAHT school leaders’ union, said it was “astonishing that the government is cutting its secondary school teacher training targets at a time when schools are in the grip of a spiralling recruitment and retention crisis”.

Just 17 per cent of the required physics

teachers were recruited last year, but the DfE has reduced the target for this September by over 20 per cent.

The DfE said targets “reflect changes in both supply and demand; different drivers may act upon targets for different subjects”.

“For example, more favourable physics teacher retention forecasts this year have acted to reduce the physics target.”

But Geoff Barton, general secretary of the ASCL leaders’ union, said the decision to reduce targets “whatever the technical explanation, will be regarded with suspicion as it obviously looks like an attempt to make the recruitment figures look better”.

Last year, the government recruited 50 per cent of the secondary teachers needed and 91 per cent of the required primary teachers.

ANALYSIS: OFSTED

# Ofsted eyes tweaks to inspector role to boost expertise

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Ofsted is “keen to understand” how it could “reconsider” aspects of its inspector role to boost expertise as it battles with staff being poached by academy trusts and the “highest ever” level of apathy towards joining the inspectorate.

It admitted that salaries “in many parts of the sector exceed” the wages it is “currently able to afford”, in response to the parliamentary education committee’s report on its work.

The retention issue comes after a survey revealed that more teachers than ever had no interest in joining the inspectorate – and exploratory analysis suggests inspectors are visiting schools outside of their area of expertise.

### Trusts poach Ofsted inspectors

Between November 2021 and November 2023, excluding those who retired, 42 per cent of schools’ inspectors left to join multi-academy trusts.

While the HMI salary has declined in real terms amid “budget constraints”, exit surveys show that “ways of working and workloads are often significant contributing factors”.

But there are also recruitment problems. Asked last month if they would “ever consider becoming an Ofsted inspector”, nearly half of teachers said they “definitely would not”.

It was the highest proportion saying they had no interest in the role since the question was first asked by Teacher Tapp four years ago.

The watchdog said its “Big Listen” public consultation is an “opportunity to work with the sector on addressing these issues”.

“We have been open about the constraints we work within, including competing with higher salary offers, but we are keen to understand the parts of our job offer that we could reconsider.

“This might include greater flexibility, our training offer, or the type of work that our inspectors undertake. But it is crucial for us to hear directly from professionals on what barriers may be preventing them from working with us – including those with more specialist knowledge.”

### Are schools getting suitable inspectors?

MPs want Ofsted to ensure that a lead inspector has expertise in the type of school they are



inspecting. In larger teams, the majority of inspectors should have that experience.

Ofsted said its “ambition” was to “match expertise to inspection wherever possible”. But this was “more difficult for types of specialist provision for which there are fewer providers”.

Sir Martyn Oliver, the chief inspector, previously told Schools Week that “ultimately, the idea would be to make the sectors being inspected feel as if the people inspecting them are commensurate to the setting”.

It is not possible to accurately check how big a problem this is.

Schools Week analysed whether the lead inspectors in the most recently published inspections had relevant experience based on their pen portraits, which are a short summary of an inspector’s CV.

Of the 20 primary schools, 14 HMIs’ pen portraits stated they had worked in primaries. Among the 20 secondaries, just eight referenced

prior secondary experience.

Of the 10 SEND schools, half appeared to have relevant experience.

Ofsted said pen portraits were only “snapshots of an HMI’s prior career and experience” and “not meant to be exhaustive lists of all areas of their expertise”.

“Cross-referencing school inspection reports with what is or isn’t mentioned on a pen portrait doesn’t make for accurate analysis.”

But NAHT general secretary Paul Whiteman said: “Schools should only ever be inspected by Ofsted teams with direct, relevant experience of the phase they are inspecting”.

### Calls for better public data

A study by UCL’s Institute of Education and the University of Southampton looked at more than 30,000 school inspections in England between 2011 and 2019.

It found both primaries and secondaries had visits from inspectors who appeared to be specialists in the other phase. Specialisms were defined as where inspectors spent 70 per cent of their inspections at the same school phase.

John Jerrim, professor of education and social statistics at University College London and study co-author, said they only had “anecdotal evidence” about how prevalent this issue is. He hopes Ofsted will provide further data so researchers can investigate.

Ofsted has committed to “developing further the existing pen portraits of inspectors to describe the expertise within our workforce”.

## Ofsted response to MPs: in brief

1. £8.5 million more funding needed to “increase the length and depth” of inspections, as MPs called for.
2. Exploring splitting complaints figures between those based on concerns over grades or inspector conduct.
3. MAT inspections “inevitable”, but group visits could include councils and dioceses too.
4. Review risk assessment model for which ‘good’ schools get graded inspections.
5. Website will be changed to show the “full range” of judgments, not just the overall effectiveness grade.



## ANALYSIS: GOVERNANCE

# Schools slow to publish governor diversity details

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EXCLUSIVE

Fears over data protection and a lack of responses are preventing schools and trusts from publishing information on the diversity of their governors and trustees.

Last year, the government encouraged leaders to collect information on governing boards and make the figures “widely accessible” to make boards “increasingly reflective of the communities they serve”.

New governance guides tailored separately for maintained schools and academy trusts and released this week re-emphasised the push.

A National Governance Association survey in 2021 found 93 per cent of respondents were white. Just 1 per cent were from mixed or multi-ethnic groups, 3 per cent were Asian and 1 per cent were Black.

But analysis by *Schools Week* of the websites of the largest trusts, as well as a random sample of smaller chains and local authority maintained schools, found very few have published data so far.

Sam Henson, deputy chief executive of the NGA, warned there was a “lack of clarity on what data should be published and how to avoid identifying specific board members”.

“Given these challenges and the already heavy workload that boards are grappling with, it’s not a total surprise that many have chosen not to engage,” he said.

Samira Sadeghi, director of trust governance at the Confederation of School Trusts, added that, while the principle behind the idea was “a good one”, there are “practical challenges in doing this and meeting data protection requirements”.

“Boards and committees will usually be quite small, and trusts need to avoid inadvertently disclosing individuals’ personal data,” she said.

Of the 10 largest trusts, none have published data. The Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust’s website states that it has asked – but so far only received data from 5 per cent of governors.

Chief executive Nick Hurn said he did not know why the response rate was low, but this was “maybe apathy rather than anything else”.

Some trusts also struggle more than others to recruit ethnically diverse governors because of their location. In the North-East, where his trust



operates, 90.6 per cent of the population is white British, compared to 81.2 per cent in the North-West and 71.8 per cent in the East Midlands.

Being a Catholic trust “adds another complication”, as governing bodies have to be made up mainly of “practising Catholics”, he added.

“Schools could do with professional people helping on boards, and we do have a good range, but there’s probably more people who could provide skills and expertise which schools would benefit from,” Hurn added.

“It’s very difficult to get people to do these jobs because it’s a hell of a lot of time and commitment for people who have busy jobs themselves.”

A spokesperson for the Acorn Education Trust said they were “confident that our governors and trustees reflect the communities they serve”, adding that collating the information while respecting privacy was a “lengthy process”.

REAch2 said it was in the “process of finalising details of this data as it will cover all those who volunteer across our schools to support our governance and not just trustees, and we will publish this in due course”.



Sam Henson

The Academies Enterprise Trust said it was in the “final stages of concluding a recruitment process for additional trustees to join our board and, once completed, we will review what we are

able to publish, while being mindful of GDPR requirements”.

Concerns over data protection are a common theme. United Learning said it did not currently publish data “as this would lead to identifying individuals and protected characteristics in data protection terms”.

Oasis Community Learning said data protection law restricted the “processing of special category data, such as ethnicity, without appropriate grounds”.

“While we are unable to provide specific ethnicity details due to these legal constraints, we remain committed and continuously strive to ensure that our trustee selection process prioritises diversity and representation.”

GLF Schools does not publish diversity “as it is not a statutory requirement, but the trust recognises and celebrates the diversity of our schools and our communities”.

Ormiston said diversity and broad representation was “very important to us” and that trustees were profiled on its website, but it did not address the lack of data.

The DfE acknowledged that in some cases individuals may be identifiable, even when data is anonymised. “We would not expect schools or trusts to publish information when doing so could bring the risk of harm to an individual,” it added.

However boards that choose not to publish their diversity information “are still expected to reflect on their membership and take action to address any diversity gaps that they identify”.

NEWS

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# Oracy to take centre-stage as union boss heads ‘entitlement’ commission

**FREDDIE WHITTAKER**  
@FCDWHITTAKER

Outgoing union boss Geoff Barton (pictured) will lead a commission on oracy to build a blueprint for a “national entitlement” across “all stages” of education in England.

Barton, who will stand down as general secretary of the ASCL leaders’ union next month, was an English teacher and long-serving head before he was elected in 2017.

Labour announced last year that its curriculum review will “explore how to weave oracy into lessons throughout school” if it wins power. The commission is likely to influence the party’s thinking on the issue.

It is backed by Voice 21, which is part of Big Education, an academy trust and charity co-founded by Peter Hyman, one of Sir Keir Starmer’s closest advisers.

The commission “has been set up in response to the growing recognition of the importance of spoken language to children’s learning and life chances”, Voice 21 said in a press release.

It also pointed to a recent English subject report from



Ofsted, which found the teaching of reading has “improved markedly” but the curriculum for writing and spoken language is “less effective”.

And it shared YouGov polling that found more than eight in 10 parents would support more time being spent on oracy.

The commission will report in September and outline an “evidence-based framework for oracy education which ensures children have the knowledge, skills and attributes to thrive in education, work and life”.

It will also make recommendations for the implementation of a national entitlement to oracy education for all children.

Joining Barton on the commission are Cabot Learning Federation director Sally Apps, University of Leeds professor Stephen Coleman, curriculum guru Christine Counsell and professor of sociolinguistics Rob Drummond.

Also on board are Sarah Houghton from mental health charity Place2Be, National Theatre chief executive Rufus Norris and Sonia Thompson, head of St Matthew’s CE Primary School in Birmingham.

Barton will say today that “as society changes so rapidly around us and we observe the rise of the robots, it is time to take the essential human skills of speaking and listening and move them centre-stage”.

## ‘Missed opportunity’ as teaching hubs lose CPD role

The Department for Education has been accused of a “missed opportunity” after it emerged teaching school hubs will no longer provide additional CPD from the autumn.

The DfE named the TSHs that will continue from September after a reaccreditation process.

The 87 hubs will play a role in delivering school-based initial teacher training, national professional qualifications, the early career framework and appropriate body services.

TSHs, which cover geographical patches, were established in 2021 and had also previously offered additional professional development programmes in areas such as behaviour and special educational needs.

However, Kathryn Morgan, senior capacity improvement advisor at the Teaching School Hub Council, said that will no longer be the case.

She added “because we are so powerful as a network of hubs, using that local intelligence, I think for us to not be able to provide other professional development is somewhat of a missed opportunity.”

“That doesn’t mean though, I don’t understand why that’s happened. Obviously they want hubs to be able to focus on the core bread and butter of the golden thread and with appropriate body services, and that’s a significant amount of work.”

“So, I think from the department’s perspective, it’s what you’re doing, let’s do that really well, not muddy the water with lots of more CPD,” she said at the ASCL conference in Liverpool.

“Let’s let other providers be able to do that. And let’s make sure that hubs continue to be facilitators of the golden thread, but also conveners of other approved professional development that might be out there in the sector.”

A DfE spokesperson said Teaching School Hubs “will continue to signpost Continuing Professional Development opportunities that are available through our approved training programmes.”

## 32k children wait TWO YEARS for mental health help

Tens of thousands of children and young people are waiting years for mental health treatment, the office of the children’s commissioner has warned.

Dame Rachel de Souza warned that some children were waiting a “significant portion of their young lives” for the support they needed, and called for “the right early support” to cut demand for health services.

Data obtained by de Souza’s office using its legal powers shows 949,200 children and young people had active referrals to mental health services in the 2022-23 financial year. This can’t be compared to previous years due to a change in methodology.

Of those with active referrals during that year, almost 305,000, or 32 per cent, entered treatment and 373,000, or 39 per cent, had their referrals closed before accessing

treatment.

But 270,300, or 28 per cent, were still waiting to receive their second contact with services at the end of the year.

Those still waiting at the end of the year waited on average 142 days for their second contact.

But some waited far longer. The analysis found 32,200 had waited at least two years. Among those children, the average wait time was 1,361 days, more than three years.

“Children are still waiting far too long to access the support they need, and for too many children the speed at which they can access support is still down to the luck of where they live,” said de Souza.

“With the right early support, many children would not need access to mental health services.”



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## INVESTIGATION: NDAS

# Ousted heads tell Ofsted chief of gagging clause ordeals

LUCAS CUMISKEY

@LUCAS\_CUMISKEY

EXCLUSIVE

The practice of gagging headteachers who are ousted after bad Ofsted reports could be “papering over wide cracks in the system”, Ruth Perry’s sister has warned, as analysis reveals that three in five leaders had moved on a year after an ‘inadequate’ judgment.

The use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) was raised with Sir Martyn Oliver, Ofsted’s chief inspector, at a meeting convened by Perry’s sister Julia Waters this week. Oliver is trying to repair the watchdog’s reputation after a coroner concluded that an Ofsted inspection contributed to the Caversham Primary School head’s suicide in January last year.

But others are now demanding a culture change in what happens after ‘inadequate’ grades are issued.

## ‘Shame and humiliation’

Analysis shows that 61 per cent of headteachers of schools rated ‘inadequate’ in 2021-22 were no longer in the position 12 months later.

In contrast, only 23 per cent of ‘outstanding’ schools, 17 per cent of ‘good’ schools and 23 per cent of ‘requires improvement’ schools had different heads one year on.

But irrespective of whether the decision to sack a headteacher was right, some ousted heads who spoke to *Schools Week* on condition of anonymity were concerned at the practice of signing NDAs as part of their departure.

One was driven to the brink of suicide and now works as a teacher, another still feels “shame and humiliation”, while a third said being hounded from the school “shattered” his confidence and ended his nearly 30-year teaching career.

According to the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) an NDA, sometimes known as a confidentiality clause, can be included in settlement agreements after a “dispute which results in someone leaving a job to keep details confidential”.

NDAs can be used to keep the sum of



money involved in a settlement agreement – and some or all of its terms and surrounding circumstances – confidential.

Last summer, *Schools Week* sent freedom of information requests to the 30 largest multi-academy trusts in England, asking how many staff had signed NDAs in recent years. Of the 13 trusts that responded, 190 such agreements were brokered between 2018 and July 2023. Pre-2018, nine trusts said that 393 NDAs had been signed.

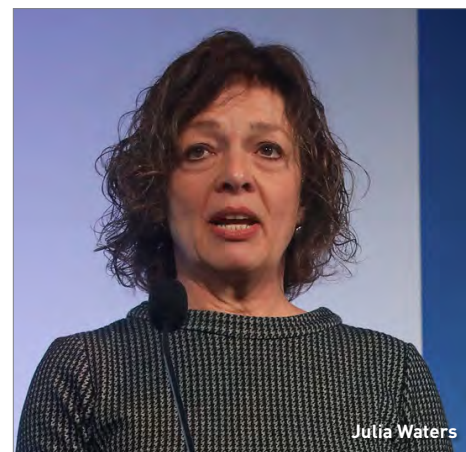
A headteacher at a local authority-maintained school in the North East said he was forced out after an “awful inspection” in 2016 saw the school graded ‘requires improvement’.

“The support from the local authority from that moment was absolutely non-existent,” he said.

Soon after, he claimed he was blocked from attending a meeting by the chair of governors while they discussed his future at the school. The next day, he decided to kill himself, although a friend intervened and saved his life.

## ‘Situation is iniquitous’

“Since the death of Ruth Perry, there is no question this is an important story to tell. The



Julia Waters

current situation is absolutely iniquitous,” the former headteacher said.

The ASCL helped to negotiate the terms of his departure. He was “broken emotionally and mentally” and felt he “no choice” but to sign the NDA.

Another headteacher said Ofsted had downgraded his school to ‘inadequate’ within the past five years. He claimed this led to governors ousting him, with an NDA signed, and alleges his union, the ASCL, was “almost complicit”, as it advised him to sign it.

“If this was called out earlier, then maybe this practice wouldn’t be so commonplace,”

Continued on next page

INVESTIGATION: NDAS

he said.

Before attending a meeting with the school's chair of governors, he called his union and explained the situation. They allegedly told him that he would "be put onto gardening leave. 'You won't be going back, so clear your office'.

"I didn't know what that meant for my future, whether I'd ever be employable again," he said.

In a statement, a woman told of her recent Ofsted "experience as headteacher of a school in special measures". She was starting to "see positive change" but, in late 2022, Ofsted inspectors "ripped (the) school apart".

"The things they said about our school were inexplicably cruel and unjustified," she said.

In the final feedback meeting, she felt "broken" and "couldn't speak".

She developed "chronic stress hives", suffered "debilitating" panic attacks and had "thoughts life would be better if I disappeared". She "couldn't carry on in post".

She signed a confidentiality clause as part of a package to leave her contract early and now "deeply" regrets doing so.

**'NDA use is commonplace'**

Richard Tanton, director of member support at ASCL, said the service was "unable to comment on individual cases" but urged members to raise concerns directly.

He said ASCL supports members in "situations where their employer has initiated a protected conversation around a possible settlement agreement" and its "advice is based on forensic analysis and careful consideration of the legal options available".

In education, as in other sectors, he said "it is commonplace for non-disclosure clauses to be included within settlement agreements, and it would often not be possible to secure these agreements" without them.

Esther Maxwell, a partner at Shakespeare Martineau, added that NDAs can be a "good way of mitigating the risk of ex-employees" bringing costly employment tribunal claims against schools. They protect confidential information acquired at work and "allow both parties a clean break and a potentially dignified exit".

But Waters said their use has made it "more difficult to find out how widespread problems are. By preventing people from



Esther Maxwell



Ruth Perry

speaking out we might, in effect, be papering over some wide cracks in the system.

"I have been contacted by hundreds of teachers and headteachers, but if others are gagged ... no-one can know how big a problem this is."

Emma Knights, co-chief executive of the National Governance Association, said members had told her that NDAs were quite often "instigated by the leader", for instance because they "can't face the community" after a bad Ofsted.

"Sadly there is not the data for us to know exactly what proportion of cases this is," she added.

But "in other cases", governors have been "concerned" about a head's performance and "the Ofsted visit gives them the evidence to take the discussions further".

Knights suggested that data on whether sacking heads happens more often in trusts with "executive line management than it does with your traditional board of governors" would be useful.

**'Ofsted fear culture must be overcome'**

But she added that the "culture of fear" of Ofsted needs to be overcome: "It's about us all – leaders, governors, trustees – having the courage of our convictions and knowing when something is fundamentally on the decline and in real trouble, as opposed to a tiny glitch, as in the Ruth Perry situation."

An Ofsted spokesperson said that "no teacher should be forced to



Sir Martyn Oliver

sign an NDA after an inspection result" and its big listen consultation is "the start of a process of acting on feedback and delivering reforms".

Some areas are also doing more to support heads after negative Ofsted experiences.

In January Southampton council and trusts in the area backed the "Caversham Covenant" support network for senior teachers.

Named in honour of Perry, it is underpinned by an "understanding that for negative Ofsted inspections, the default solution is to support the head to address the issues causing concern".

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# Appoint a poverty tsar, says ex-children's commissioner

**FREDDIE WHITTAKER**

**@FCDWHITTAKER**

The government should appoint a poverty tsar, have a children's minister attend cabinet meetings and extend free meals to all pupils in settings with the greatest need, a former children's commissioner has said.

A new report from Anne Longfield's Centre for Young Lives think-tank and Child of the North project also called for a government plan to support schools to reduce the impact of poverty and the setting up of a child poverty unit in Downing Street.

The report includes new data from more than 60,000 pupils collected by the Connected Bradford project – set up to link education data with that of health, social care and other parts of local government.

It found 57 per cent of those identified as persistently absent in the district were eligible for free school meals. Eligible children were also three times more



Anne Longfield

likely to become persistently absent at some point.

It added that meals for all pupils "should be a long-term ambition for all schools, but we should start by initially targeting schools in local areas with the most disadvantaged children and young people".

The report also said that automatic registration of eligible families for free school meals "should be implemented immediately given that 11 per cent of total eligible pupils are not registered for means-tested FSM".

The government should re-establish the poverty unit in Downing Street. The last one was scrapped in 2016.

A poverty tsar and cabinet-level minister for children and young people should also be appointed to "drive reform", with the "authority to challenge policymaking at all levels". It should be a voice "direct from the front line who has experience of working within education settings".

Schools had become "anchor institutions within many disadvantaged areas

throughout the UK", the report said. But the need to address problems outside school gates "makes it difficult to help children thrive educationally".

Schools should have access to more pastoral support, family workers, educational psychologists and youth workers. There should be breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, extended school opening, enrichment activities and holiday play schemes for all primary school-age children.

Longfield said school funding was "being squandered because the effects of poverty are not being addressed as an integral part of educational provision".

"Schools should no longer have to use sticking plaster solutions to tackle poverty," she said.

Sir Dan Moynihan, chief executive of the Harris Federation, has called for targeted interventions to cut the attainment gap and support poorer pupils.

Writing for Schools Week, he said "a joined up anti-poverty strategy and more public spending will improve educational outcomes, and better educational outcomes are key to growth and productivity, which in turn means the strategy will pay for itself".

SAMANTHA BOOTH | @SAMANTHAJBOOTH

## Suspended pupils a year behind by GCSEs, researchers find

Suspended secondary school pupils are about a year behind their peers on average by the time they take their GCSEs, new research has found, putting a number on the "suspension grades gap" for the first time.

However, researchers warned they "cannot be sure" that suspension itself caused the difference in GCSE grades, as there could be other "unmeasured characteristics".

The Education Policy Institute found suspended pupils were, on average, not achieving a grade 4 pass in GCSE English and maths. Their average grade was 2.78 compared with 4.72 for their non-suspended classmates.

Researchers commissioned by the charity Impetus warned that suspended pupils were on average 12 months behind their non-suspended peers.

The EPI said nearly half of the effect of suspensions on attainment appeared to be driven by other factors such as demographics, socio-economic disadvantage, prior attainment and school characteristics. But the gap remained "significant and stark".

The think-tank made policy recommendations, including that schools

should "proactively" identify pupils at risk of suspension for early intervention.

Ben Gadsby, head of policy and research at Impetus, said: "While it is not a surprise that suspended pupils get worse outcomes, this new research puts a number on the 'suspension grades gap' for the first time.

"With only half the reason for these different outcomes being explained by measurable differences between pupils and schools, this is an important finding about the need to focus on the underlying issues that reduce a pupil's chances of succeeding in school."

The research found pupils suspended 10 times were 15 times more likely to be permanently excluded and finish secondary school in alternative provision than pupils suspended once.

These children were almost three times as likely to be identified with special educational needs and disabilities as pupils who were suspended once. Social, emotional or mental health needs (SEMH) were most common among suspended pupils.

Meanwhile, 22 per cent of suspended pupils were identified as persistently absent before

their first suspension, the think-tank found.

Recent government data showed a 39 per cent increase in suspensions in the 2022-23 autumn term compared with 2019. Suspension rates had been increasing gradually before the pandemic.

The think-tank said schools should plan early intervention for those identified as at risk of suspension. The government should also work with Ofsted to ensure that suspended pupils have access to high quality education.

Whitney Crenna-Jennings, EPI's mental health and wellbeing associate director, said it was "vital" that schools were given resources to help identify pupils with mental health and additional needs "to make early intervention possible".

Paul Whiteman, general secretary at school leaders' union NAHT, said schools only use suspensions and exclusions as a "last resort to ensure the safety of pupils and staff".

A DfE spokesperson said AP schools will provide "targeted support" to mainstream schools under its reforms, which "will increase attendance and allow schools to support pupils who are at risk of exclusion".

# Unions highlight confusion and concern over transgender guidance

## SCHOOLS WEEK REPORTER

@SCHOOLSWEEK

Sector bodies have sounded the alarm in their responses to a consultation on the government's controversial transgender guidance, which closed this week. Here's what you need to know ...

### Schools need legal backing

As revealed by *Schools Week*, the government's own lawyers said schools faced a "high risk" of successful legal challenges if they followed several elements of the guidance.

In its submission, the NASUWT teachers' union, said trust in the "legality of the draft guidance will remain low" until ministers can "provide more convincing evidence that it reflects the best possible understanding of the legal position".

As the proposed guidance is non-statutory, the NASUWT said it "does not provide protection" from legal cases against those "who believe that their statutory or regulatory rights have been breached".

Unions also said the guidance does not fully align with equalities legislation and the Keeping Children Safe in Education safeguarding duties that schools must follow.

Julie McCulloch, the ASCL's director of policy, said that if the government "cannot provide assurance that schools and colleges will not be leaving themselves open to legal challenge by following this guidance, then the government itself must commit to taking on any legal challenges that arise against schools".

### In a child's best interests?

Leora Cruddas, chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts, said the body was in talks with the Department for Education about "the relationship of this draft guidance with statutory guidance, most crucially on safeguarding.

"We feel it is important that a child-centred approach based on individual circumstances is put at the centre of decision-making," she said.

The NASUWT said that the need for schools to act in the best interests of children "underpins some of the most important legal obligations placed on them, particularly those related to child protection and safeguarding" – but the guidance conflicts with these.



The NAHT, which published a summary of its response, said it was a "significant oversight" that consideration of the mental health and well-being of children and young people was "not one of the overarching principles".

The ASCL highlighted "confusion and concern" around how the guidance applies to youngsters of different ages.

It pointed out that the guidance says requests to transition from primary school pupils "should be treated with greater caution", but then adds that such children "should not have different pronouns" used – which implies that "this key aspect of social transitioning should never be permitted".

### No help with practical issues

Dr Patrick Roach, general secretary of the NASUWT, said the guidance "fails to provide effective support on practical issues that schools and colleges may face, including on working with children who have already transitioned with the support of their families".

Both the ASCL and NASUWT observed that the guidance does not provide support for children who have already transitioned.

Concerns were also raised about the proposed notion of "watchful waiting" in cases where schools may wish to accommodate "degrees of social transition".

The NASUWT said this would "appear to be of little practical assistance" in supporting decision-making.

"Specifically, the guidance does not set out what schools and colleges should watch out for, nor does it help them to determine a reasonable duration within which they should

watch and wait in particular cases."

The ASCL also highlighted the expectation put on schools to "make decisions before a pupil is permitted to socially transition which, in our view, require clinical expertise".

Meanwhile on parents, the NASUWT added: "The guidance is silent on the most effective ways of working with parents who are supportive of their child's decisions."

### So, what should happen now?

The NAHT said it was "essential" that the government "release any legal review they receive on the final guidance, and be explicit throughout the guidance, any areas which may, despite best efforts for clarity, remain legally ambiguous" so that schools can take their own advice.

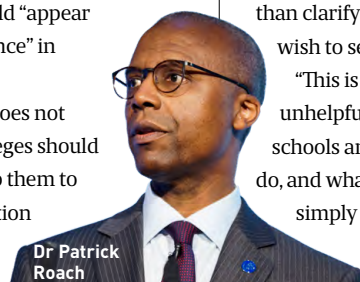
Roach said he wanted the draft guidance withdrawn and replaced. Any revisions should be made after "full consultation" with the sector.

The NAHT said the final guidance must be "focused solely on clarifying operational and practical issues, such as access to single-sex spaces and admissions registers".

Guidance should also be accompanied by training, support and resources for schools.

The ASCL also flagged "increasing concern" on the wider issue of "government by expectation" – setting "expectations for action by schools and colleges through non-statutory guidance, rather than clarifying and codifying the changes they wish to see in legislation.

"This is creating significant confusion, unhelpfully blurring the lines between what schools and colleges are legally required to do, and what the government of the day would simply like them to do... More clarity on this is required."



Dr Patrick Roach

# Holiday pay guidance reviewed over mistake

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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EXCLUSIVE

The government is reviewing guidance on holiday pay for term-time only workers after law firms warned that a mistake could leave schools and trusts out of pocket.

The non-statutory advice, which comes into effect in April, follows a court ruling in 2022 which means holiday pay for term-time only workers must be calculated based on the hours they work in a normal week, not pro-rated based on the weeks worked in a year.

An employment appeal tribunal ruled in 2018 that Bedford Girls School music teacher Lesley Brazel was underpaid because of the way her holiday pay was calculated. Four years later, the Supreme Court quashed an appeal by the school's parent charity, the Harper Trust.

Previously, Brazel's holiday pay was based on what she would earn in an average week, multiplied by 5.6, the statutory number of weeks of leave in England.

But the trust changed its approach to pay in 2011, calculating the total number of hours she worked each term, and paid per for 12.07 per cent of that figure.

## Confusion over 'part-year workers' definition

Government guidance published in January focuses on two types of worker affected by the change. Irregular hours workers are those whose paid hours are "wholly or mostly variable".

Part-year workers, according to the guidance, are those for whom there are periods of at least a week "which they are not required to work and for which they are not paid".

It gives an example of a worker who is paid "an annualised (flat) salary over 12 months but has periods of time that last more than one week where he is not working".

He "would not qualify as a part-year worker if his contract reflects that there are weeks where he is not working and there are no weeks where he does not receive pay".

It is this section of the guidance that has caused confusion, law firms said, because it appears to suggest that term-time only workers who are paid in 12 instalments throughout the year do not count as part-year workers.



In guidance published on its website, Browne Jacobson, a law firm based in Nottingham, said: "Put simply, we think the non-statutory guidance has got this wrong."

## Schools could end up paying more

Sarah Linden, senior associate at the firm, told Schools Week that the guidance suggested employers provide term-time only workers with 5.6 weeks of holiday, rather than being able to calculate it based on the amount they work.

The confusion "could result in education employers providing, and paying, term-time only [workers] for more statutory holiday than they otherwise need".

However, "in practice, it's a technical issue" and "likely to be of limited impact" for schools and trusts that follow the National Joint Council process for support staff pay and conditions, because the holiday entitlement is more than the statutory minimum.

Guidance issued by Stone King, another law firm that specialises in education, states that "unhelpfully, [the government guidance] gives an example which could be interpreted to indicate that because term-time only staff are paid in 12 monthly instalments, they would not be considered part-year workers".

They said the guidance was "wrong".

## Government reviewing guidance

CST chief executive Leora Cruddas said: "The uncertainty over the legal framework for holiday pay arrangements for part-time staff has been going on for too long, and it is important that both trusts and staff can finally get certainty on this.

"This looks to be a simple drafting oversight in the guidance, and we are calling on the government to correct it as soon as possible to bring that much-needed clarity."

Approached with the concerns, a Department for Business and Trade spokesperson said they were "currently reviewing the guidance and will provide an update in due course".

They added: "While the legislation defining a part-year worker applies to all sectors, we recognise this has a unique impact on those working in education."



Leora Cruddas





# DfE's costs rack up as 40 staff work on ABS 'vanity project'

**FREDDIE WHITTAKER**

@FCDWHITTAKER

**EXCLUSIVE**

The Department for Education has 40 civil servants working to develop prime minister Rishi Sunak's Advanced British Standard qualification "vanity project" even though it is unlikely to see the light of day.

Pepe Di'Iasio, incoming general secretary of the ASCL leaders' union, said it was "beyond frustrating that – at a time when recruitment, retention, funding, SEND and many other issues are under enormous pressure – there is a platoon of civil servants" having to work on the qualification.

Developing a "British baccalaureate" was a key pledge in Sunak's leadership bid in 2022. The prime minister announced last year that his government would replace A-levels and T-levels with the qualification, which will see pupils study English and maths to 18 alongside "majors" and "minors" in other subjects.

However, the reforms are expected to take at least a decade to implement and, with the Conservatives mired in the polls and Labour focused on early maths education rather than post-16, the policy is unlikely to come to fruition.

Despite this, the government last year published an 80-page consultation on its plans and set aside

£600 million for implementation.

In response to a freedom of information request, the DfE told Schools Week that 40 civil servants were "currently working mainly on the development of the ABS".

The government said it did not hold data on the amount spent on its development but, if 40 civil servants on the average salary for the department worked full-time on the policy for a year, the cost would be £2.6 million.

However, those working on policy development are likely to be more senior, and the figure of 40 staff provided by the DfE does not include staff from other teams who have contributed, so the true cost is likely to be higher.

A DfE spokesperson said they did not "recognise these figures and these calculations are purely speculative", adding that they were "taking the long-term decisions to continue to improve our education system for generations to come".

Di'Iasio said: "It's a qualification that will not be offered for another 10 years, if it happens at all, and seems more like the prime minister's vanity project than a workable policy."

"To say this is the wrong priority is an understatement, and smacks of rearranging the deckchairs while the Titanic heads for

an iceberg."

The DfE said that, alongside the "core directorate", there are a "number of teams across the wider department who are contributing to the development of ABS alongside other priorities".

These include members from legal, commercial and finance units, "as well as wider schools- and skills-focused policy teams".

The department also insisted that staff "have not been re-assigned from other projects to undertake this work, as the department operates a flexible approach to staffing in order to ensure that it can meet priorities.

"This means that staff responsibilities can shift depending on needs. As part of this we also operate flexible resource teams, particularly to manage surge policy and analytical projects. As such, a list of projects from which staff have been re-assigned is not held."

Bridget Phillipson, the shadow education secretary, told journalists at the ASCL school leaders' union conference on Saturday that "reform in the 16 to 19 space is not my priority". Labour will instead focus on early maths skills.

Paul Whiteman, leader of the NAHT union, said: "Given the number and sheer scale of the challenges facing schools, this simply should not be a major priority for the DfE."



Pepe Di'Iasio

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

## Keegan under attack for wanting to punch Ofsted inspectors

The education secretary should publicly retract her statement that she would have "punched" disrespectful Ofsted inspectors, a union has said.

The FDA civil service union, which represents Ofsted inspectors and senior staff, said the "inflammatory" comments made by Gillian Keegan at the ASCL school leaders' union conference were "completely unacceptable in any context".

During a conference Q&A, the senior Conservative recalled feeling "shocked" after hearing about the conduct of inspectors at a school she visited, as "you don't expect somebody to come in and not be respectful".

Keegan added: "I was shocked, I was actually shocked. I thought, 'God, if I'd met

these people, I'd have probably punched them'. They were really rude."

In a letter to Keegan, FDA general secretary Dave Penman said: "Many of our members have already been in touch to raise their concerns to us about your use of inflammatory language, which has further undermined the role of hard-working inspectors.

"Your comments are completely unacceptable in any context, let alone coming from the secretary of state for education."

He said her words "serve to further stoke division between inspectors and school leaders, adding to the existing difficult climate around school inspections".

Ofsted needs "credibility and trust from

its stakeholders and particularly from government", he added.

"Your recent comments have damaged this and therefore I would urge you to publicly retract them."

Responding to Keegan's comments last week, chief inspector Sir Martyn Oliver said he thought "people should act with professionalism, courtesy, empathy and respect on both sides".

He said the comments concerned an incident before his time, adding: "I'm much more interested in a fresh start and calming down tensions."

Bridget Phillipson, the shadow education secretary, accused Keegan of demeaning her position and called the comments "pathetic".

ON LOCATION: ASCL CONFERENCE



## Phillipson: No promises on SEND until after election

Labour will wait until after the general election to set out its full plans to tackle the “enormous” challenge facing the SEND system, Bridget Phillipson has said.

The shadow education secretary told journalists at the ASCL school leaders’ union conference she was “not prepared” to make promises to families that she could not keep as she was pressed repeatedly on the party’s lack of a plan for the sector.

Labour has said little on SEND and is keeping quiet about its plans for all aspects of education funding, around which many of the issues facing the sector revolve.

Phillipson said the “challenge on SEND is enormous” and admitted that it would “take us time to turn that around” if Labour forms the next government. She promised an “early focus on reforming the system”, and early intervention in children’s lives.

“I’m in no doubt as to the scale of the challenge. And we will need to get a much fuller understanding from government if we win the election as to the full extent of just how chaotic the system has become and what needs to change.”

Providing earlier support to pupils with less complex needs would “free up” specialist



Bridget Phillipson

provision for those who need “ongoing support”, she said.

The government also needs to “do more” to support school staff with training and development to help a “more diverse range of needs” in mainstream schools.

Pressed further, she said she was “only prepared to make commitments I’m absolutely confident that I can keep and, as I was saying in my speech, promises that I know I can deliver”.

She added: “I think families of children with SEND have had enough of a system that isn’t delivering but have had enough of promises from politicians that just haven’t been kept and I’m not prepared to do that.”

[Full story here](#)

## More security needed to ensure exams are fair

Ofqual has asked exam boards to introduce new security measures, its chief regulator has said. The call follows police investigations after cyber attacks at three exam boards last summer.

Sir Ian Bauckham told the ASCL conference that “clearly examinations cannot be fair if some people get access to secure examination materials beforehand”.

He added: “We’ve asked exam boards to introduce additional security measures this year, including multi-factor authentication for accessing exam sites to make sure that those are only accessed by people who are authorised to access them.”

Exam boards have set target dates to move towards on-screen examinations but AQA announced last week that it has delayed its plans.

Bauckham said Ofqual would make “rigorous



Sir Ian Bauckham

checks” to ensure exams are fair and urged boards to make sure “systems are not going to be at risk of falling over and messing up examinations”.

“We cannot afford either a large-scale failure, nor can we afford to have innovations in assessment which accidentally introduce unfairness,” he added.

[Full story here](#)



Geoff Barton

## Drop in pupil numbers ‘no reason to cut funding’

Political parties should commit to keeping funding at the same level despite falling school rolls, and use the headroom to boost per-pupil funding and money for disadvantaged children, the ASCL leader has said.

Pupil numbers are expected to fall by around 10 per cent over the next decade, as a population bulge caused by the 2000s baby boom makes its way into adulthood.

In his final address before stepping down in April, Geoff Barton acknowledged that “money is tight”.

But he added: “There is something that politicians from all sides can and should commit to over the course of the next parliament which is affordable, and which would make a huge difference.

“Instead of raking this money back into the Treasury, there is a golden opportunity to put education on a more sustainable footing.”

Barton also called for “learning environments to be fit for learning”, after leaders reported uncomfortably hot and cold classrooms, poor electrics and leaking ceilings.

A survey by Teacher Tapp for ASCL found 57 per cent of teachers and leaders had taught in classrooms that were too hot in summer due to poor ventilation, while 28 per cent reported being too cold in winter because of inadequate heating.

[Full story here](#)

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

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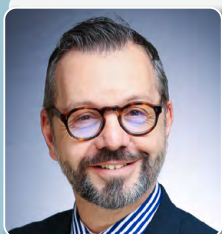
**Kat Howard**

**Executive school improvement lead (secondary), Windsor Academy Trust**

**Start date:** March 4

**Current/previous job:** Executive director of school improvement, CORE Education Trust

**Interesting fact:** Kat once served former PM John Major a full English breakfast in her first job in silver service at a local country house. She also got down to the final audition for soap opera Hollyoaks but didn't make the cut.



**James Bidduph**

**CEO designate, Avanti Schools Trust**

**Start date:** May

**Current/previous job:** Executive headteacher, University of Cambridge Primary School

**Interesting fact:** James is a budding author and has two book series for which he is concept editor. He has also written a crime novel, but can't work out who did it. He is currently on sabbatical, travelling in Nepal and India.



**Summer Turner**

**Deputy chief executive, Broad Horizons Education Trust**

**Start date:** September

**Current/previous job:** Principal, Jane Austen College in Norwich

**Interesting fact:** Summer likes to travel and once spent two months living in the rainforest in Belize sleeping in a hammock in the trees, clearing trails during the day and narrowly avoiding dangerous encounters with curious snakes and tarantulas.



**Majella McCarthy**

**Director of children's services, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council**

**Start date:** April

**Current/previous job:** Director of children's social care, Together For Children

**Interesting fact:** Majella also has a love of travel and adventure, including zip wiring across a tropical rainforest in Costa Rica, hot-air ballooning in Morocco and horse riding in Spain.

# Movers & Shakers

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

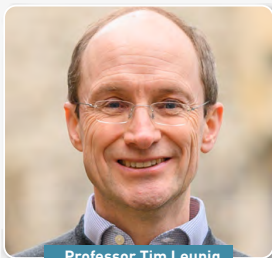
Please let us know of any new faces leading your school, trust or education organisation by emailing [news@schoolswweek.co.uk](mailto:news@schoolswweek.co.uk)

## Four new trustees at EPI

FEATURED

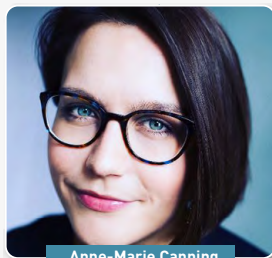
The Education Policy Institute think-tank has appointed four new trustees. Professor Sir Chris Husbands, Professor Tim Leunig and Anne-Marie Canning MBE will join next month. Meanwhile Hardip Begol, an Ofqual board member and former senior civil servant at the Department for Education, joins in May.

Leunig worked in policy roles across government departments and is now a director at Public First consultants. Husbands is a former vice-chancellor of



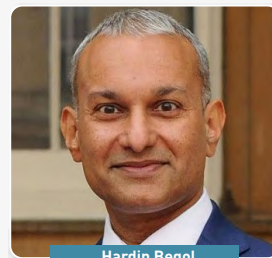
Professor Tim Leunig

Sheffield Hallam University, while Canning is chief executive of The Brilliant Club, a university access charity focused on increasing the number of less advantaged



Anne-Marie Canning

students at top institutions. They join the chair David Laws, Baroness Sally Morgan, Charles Brand and Dr Kitty Stewart on the EPI board.



Hardip Begol

Please let us know of any new faces leading your school, trust or education organisation by emailing [news@schoolswweek.co.uk](mailto:news@schoolswweek.co.uk)



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Profile

JESSICA HILL | @JESSJANEHILL

# ‘School governance needs to be completely reimaged’

From California’s Death Row to school governance, the Confederation of School Trusts’ Samira Sadeghi explains how these issues are more linked than you might think...

When Samira Sadeghi is delivering training to support sector leaders getting governance right, she explains how insights gleaned about human fallibility from her time working as a lawyer on death row can help.

The eight prisoners Sadeghi, director of trust governance for the Confederation of School Trusts, represented during her twelve-year legal career on California’s Death Row “almost without fail” had one thing in common. They had all experienced “pretty major traumas” before the age of three – the most important time for brain development.

The trauma left their prefrontal cortexes “severely compromised”, she says, meaning their “impulse control was gone, and they were left on edge and stressed”.

There’s a “direct parallel” between the prefrontal cortex and school governance, Sadeghi adds, as both are where “decision making, monitoring your performance, problem solving, planning ahead,

and goal-directed behaviour come from”.

As with governance, when these elements “function poorly”, it becomes “very difficult to succeed”.

## Human rights passion

Sadeghi’s desire to work in human rights came after two of her uncles and an aunt were imprisoned for attending political rallies in Iran, where she lived as a child for six years.

Her extended family are well-educated (most of them are doctors) which meant when revolution broke out in 1979, they were able to “rebuild their lives abroad”.

Her immediate family returned to America, where Sadeghi was born, and settled in Los Angeles.

Studying political science at the University of California, she spent a year at the UK’s University of Exeter, where she met her future husband.

She stayed to complete an international history masters at the London School of Economics,

before joining human rights organisation Amnesty International on an internship. Tasks included sifting through “horrible” photographs of torture and extrajudicial killings in Guatemala and writing posts about political prisoners – many of whom were Iranian.

After moving back to San Francisco with her partner, Sadeghi studied law and joined a project working with prisoners on Death Row at the city’s San Quentin prison.

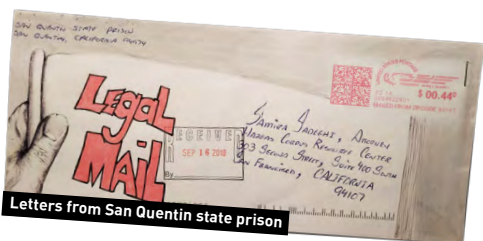
She became “fascinated” with her task of telling the “incredibly rich, powerful and compelling” life stories of those she represented.

“When you humanize someone by telling their story, people feel they understand them and it’s a lot harder to kill them.”

## Life stories on Death Row

Three of the prisoners had spent their entire adult life incarcerated. To extract their stories faithfully, she had to learn “how to be comfortable with silence, and ask open questions” (she normally

# Profile: Samira Sadeghi



“talks nonstop”).

She would take in popcorn on her prison visits. “Any treat they got came from us. They loved being able to interact with another human.”

Her first case was an 18-year-old jailed for three murders in quick succession, two of which were drug related. Two days after her last day in the job, the court finally granted him a hearing for a claim on the grounds of intellectual disability. But four years later, he was resentenced to life in prison.

“There are no winners in Death Row work ... It’s such a painful thing to imagine someone living in a 8ft by 4ft box for the rest of their lives, as a result of having ... experienced such horrendous acts of violence against them as a child that it warps their ability to behave within our societal norms.”

Identifying the path from trauma to criminal behaviour prompts Sadeghi to worry whether teachers are being “trained enough on how to spot trauma induced behaviours”.

“When a kid comes across as not having any remorse or impulsivity, there could be a trauma basis for that”. She cautions that “an authoritarian attitude” will “just make that behaviour worse”.

### Moving upstream

Death Row work was “never a 9 to 5 job” and she quit to “make up for lost time” with her two children, then three and six.

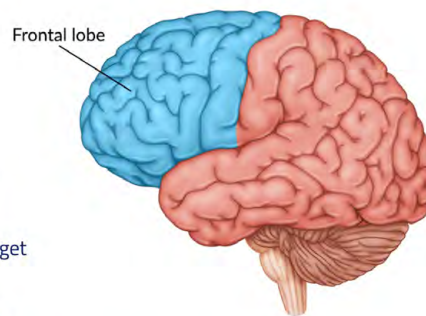
After they moved to London in 2010, Sadeghi became a governor at her kids’ school, Ark Academy. It led to a job as Ark’s regional governance officer.

She sees the career move as akin to a quote from

## Why is governance so important? It is crucial to success.

- Decision making & judgement
- Planning ahead
  - scanning for risks & being agile
  - assessing consequences
  - controlling impulses
- Monitoring
  - evaluating performance & tweaking
- Sustained attention
  - staying focused, with eyes on the target
- Goal-directed behaviour
  - actions that will help reach our goals
- Problem solving
- Relationships

Frontal lobe



**This is governance!**



## ‘There are no winners in Death Row work’

Desmond Tutu: ‘There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.’

During four years at Ark, she noticed how the “traditional school governance model that worked for a single maintained school has been superimposed on trusts”.

Academy trusts have a board of trustees who, like maintained school governors, set the strategic vision and look over financial performance – but across the wider trust instead.

However, each academy still has a governing board, and the sector still seems to be grappling with exactly how these should operate most effectively.

Sadeghi believed back then, and still believes now, that governance needs “to be completely reimagined”.

When she joined Academies Enterprise Trust as its head of governance in 2020, she set about doing just that. Then one of England’s biggest trusts, AET had been in “really bad shape”, which Sadeghi blames partly on it being “too big” and “so spread out” geographically.

The then new chief executive, Julian Drinkall, who hired Sadeghi, had controversially removed all local governing boards and brought in paid

chairs, declaring that “playground bully parents” would no longer be allowed on boards, only those with educational expertise.

Sadeghi understood his motives for the “command and control” approach. “He had to turn things around quickly, and needed educationalists monitoring the situation.”

### Academy councils

But, she started to overhaul the model after new chief executive Rebecca Boomer-Clark took over the trust in 2021. They launched 56 new ‘academy councils’ in six months, reinjecting boards with a community focus that included two elected parents, up to two employees and a council representative.

Sadeghi believes at the trust local level, it’s “really important to get rid of the word governor, which is outdated because it’s not about governing ... we are conveying that their role is the same as in a maintained school, which it isn’t”.

Some trusts are doing this. Examples include advisory board members, council members, and champions.

Sadeghi says those in the role can help trusts “understand that school’s community, so we can contextualize our strategies to make sure they’re anchored in that community.”

# Profile: Samira Sadeghi

At AET, those who had previously sat on governing boards were invited to join the new councils. Although “some chafed because they were used to being able to make certain decisions”, the ones that AET retained were mainly local people who “bought into the idea”.

## Image problem

Sadeghi joined CST in September to run one of its ten professional communities, with hers representing trustees and governance leaders. She loves the role which involves “getting to indulge in fascinating things” from local governance to attendance, and ethical leadership.

The ‘reimagining governance’ sessions she runs encourage attendees to “throw everything you know out the window”.

She believes doing so can help with governor recruitment, which is in dire straits (a record 77 per cent of governor boards told the NGA last year it was an issue).

Governance “suffers from an image problem [of] a bunch of old white men sitting around a table with agendas and minutes and policies”.

Some governor descriptions also sound “boring – I wouldn’t want to do it. But if you posted a job role that involves partnering with the community and developing relationships with organisations, that would really appeal to me.”

She believes that trusts, including headteachers, should be out headhunting in their local communities for board members. That could mean asking “the guy who owns the business across the street from the school. We need to be recruiting in a totally different way for different people.”

There are signs the DfE agrees on the change agenda. Last week, it published two separate governance guides, tailored separately for maintained schools and trusts. “Hallelujah!”

Sadeghi says.

And getting governance right is more important than ever, she adds, given that relationships with parents have “gone completely sideways”. CST has warned that the recent rise in complaints is “not sustainable”.

## Culture shift

Sadeghi says if she can help enact culture change in the education sector, it will overtake her work on death row as her proudest achievement.

She believes progress has been hindered by



## ‘At a local level, it’s really important to get rid of the word governor’

“too much thinking about reputations ... The focus should be on what is good for the children and adults in your organisations.”

She adds the sector more generally needs to be “less adult-centred and more child and community-centred”.

For example, she questions whether, “when schools cite ‘loss of autonomy’ as the reason they don’t want to join a larger trust, is that decision based on the children or the adults?”

But she thinks the sector is working hard on that shift.



She was on the steering group behind the Academy Trust Governance Code, launched in October 2023 to “enshrine principles around how to behave – to be open, transparent, collaborative, and meaningfully engaged with your community and stakeholders”.

She believes that the code, which is “voluntary and aspirational”, will bear fruit where it is implemented, providing “a voice for all stakeholders at all levels, greater public confidence in our schools, and enable trusts to reclaim their role as institutions anchored in their communities”.

## Samira Sadeghi: CV

1999 - 2010	Attorney, Habeas Corpus Resource Centre, San Francisco
2010 -2016	Stay-at-home parent
2013 -2016	Governor, Ark Academy
2016 -2020	Regional governance office, Ark Schools
2020 -2023	Head of governance and company secretary, Academies Enterprise Trust
Sep 2023	present Director of trust governance, Confederation of School Trusts

# Opinion

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CALLUM ROBERTSON

Policy officer, Liberal Democrat Education Association

## How the Liberal Democrats will tackle persistent absence

**The approach will be defined by a combination of high standards and a warm heart, explains Callum Robertson**

Solving the persistent absence that has become endemic in our schools requires buy-in from parents and students. This can only realistically be achieved if, in the first instance, those two groups recognise what school is for.

The overall aim of our education system is for our students to leave with rock-solid academic credentials and as a well-rounded person ready to contribute to our country. And if we expect to develop young people with high standards and a warm heart, we must model those very characteristics.

However, we cannot provide world-class education without first ensuring children are in the classroom. Tackling the attendance crisis therefore must start with the heart. So how do we do this?

We start with our mission statement: every child can achieve great outcomes. This is the core and driving principle that courses through the veins of Liberal Democrat education policy. Building from that mission statement stems a series of practical measures to alleviate the problem in the short term, with a long-term view of designing out the problem in its entirety.

On day one, the first policy we want to bring in is a statutory register of those not in school for any number of reasons, be it home schooling to long-term medical illness.

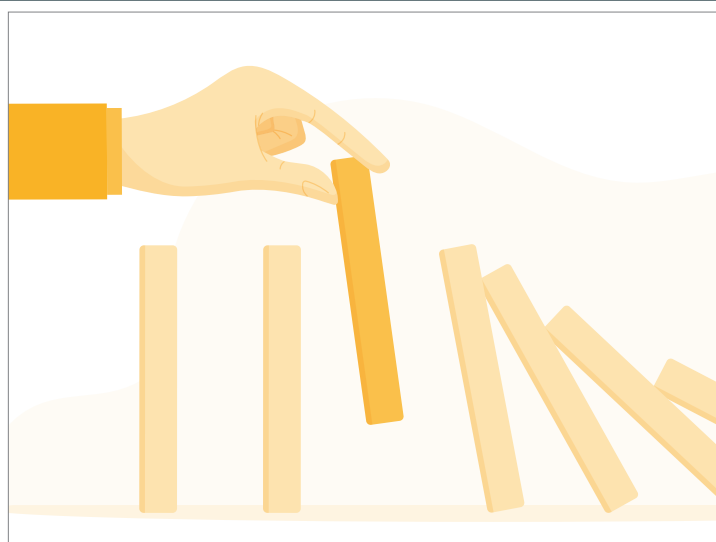
By doing this, we can improve the accuracy of the figures around school attendance, helping those who need additional support and ensuring parents work with schools to achieve consistently high attendance.

Following this, the Department for Education, LAs and MATs will be in a much better position to ascertain the scale of the problem we are facing. However, we already know that the core facts speak to persistent absence being high among two groups: students in receipt of free school meal and those with mental ill health. There is a further issue with lack of specialist provision for students with SEND.

In turn, these groups are disproportionately impacted by poorer outcomes, leading to longer-term issues with poverty and mental ill health – a vicious cycle that the education sector can break.

Therefore, the next step we must take is to improve the eligibility and funding for free school meals. We know that the real-terms funding for FSM has been cut as inflation bites.

This means the quality of food



“ This is a vicious cycle that the education sector can break

declines. As a result, the students who are eligible for FSM are getting a worse deal, year in year out. The Liberal Democrats would therefore expand eligibility for FSM to all people with parents or carers in receipt of Universal Credit and ensure that FSM funding rises at least in line with inflation.

While tackling FSM funding is important, it cannot be done in isolation. The second huge barrier to school attendance is mental ill health. The Liberal Democrats have long called for a qualified mental health practitioner in every school.

Building capacity for in-house help will free up capacity in CAMHS and allow more children to flourish in an environment where they are better supported.

Beyond just looking at the causes that keep our young people away from school, we must look at how school budget squeezes have forced an unnecessarily narrow focus on core subjects. Going back to our mission statement, we know every child can achieve great outcomes.

We know this because institutions

such as Challney High School for Girls, the Harris Federation and STAR Academies make this seem normal every time results come out.

So, we would not seek to dilute the fantastic academic offer the knowledge-rich curriculum has brought us. Rather, we would seek to enhance it with a clear funding agreement that allowed schools to make great academics the core of their offer and give them the financial headroom for a wide ranging extra-curricular offer.

We believe this would act as a draw for students who are reluctant to attend school.

It's time for a government that recognises the real challenges families face and is willing to square up to them. With a warm heart, we can ensure more of our young people benefit from our schools' commendably high standards.

*We asked the Liberal Democrats how their plans will be funded. They say they will put forward a fully-costed manifesto in due course, which will be independently verified by the IfS.*



# Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
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## British Science Week

**Labour and the Conservatives are offering different policies, but have identified the same core problem that the next government must solve, say Jeffery Quaye and Karen Skilling**

The Prime Minister's ambition to reform post-16 education and ensure all pupils study mathematics until 18 has generated a lot of feedback, among which the most constructive is that the policy will require many more qualified mathematics teachers.

Meanwhile, Labour have pledged to focus instead on a 'phonics for maths' programme aimed at younger pupils.

Both policies should be welcomed, not only because both aim to see more pupils ultimately achieve better maths outcomes but because both parties have recognised a bigger problem: a culture of negative disposition towards the subject that is holding back whole groups of learners.

Across all GCSEs taken by 16-year-olds in 2023, the pass rate is 67.8 per cent at grades 4 to 9. In maths, it's 72 per cent. Mathematics is therefore arguably in a good place. However, only 16.4 per cent of those who retook their GCSE maths in post-16 education achieved grade 4 or higher (a 4.8 per cent decline from the previous year).

Two critical questions arise: how can the policy deliver for all those the resit policy is not reaching, and why are so few of those who are successful choosing to study mathematics after their GCSEs?

The answer to both questions rests in challenging negative attitudes towards mathematics and their pernicious effect on pupils' achievement. Rightly, this issue is taking centre stage in the election and will hopefully affect decision making and practices in schools afterwards, whoever wins.

More mathematics is a good thing! Sadly, too many of our pupils have been socialised to hate the subject, often by adults in their lives who affirm such

**DR JEFFERY QUAYE**

National director of education and standards, Aspirations Academies Trust



**DR KAREN SKILLING**

Associate professor, Department of Education, University of Oxford

### Whoever wins, both parties have done the right maths on STEM

attitudes or fail to challenge them. Over time, these negative attitudes adversely impact learning.

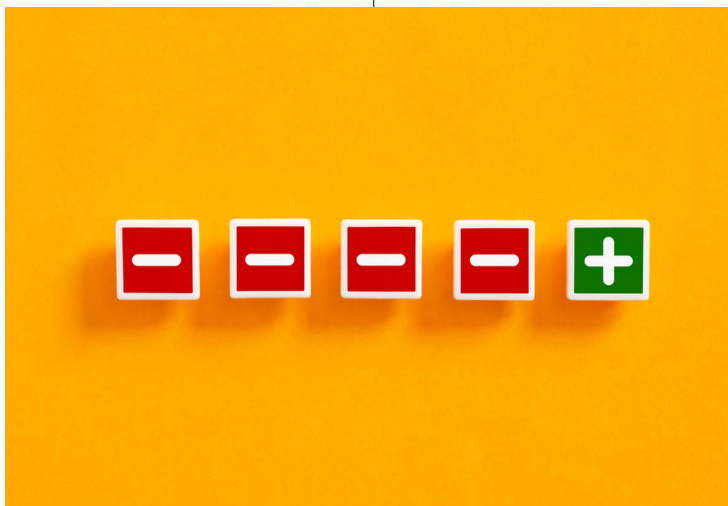
Worse, these attitudes are not spread evenly and often impact disadvantaged and under-represented groups the most. Research has shown that there are gender and social class differences in negative dispositions towards mathematics, affecting girls who remain vastly under-represented in STEM professions, and working-class children who are already negatively affected by economic deprivation.

The school curriculum should

therefore promote equity through the development of positive attitudes towards mathematics. This should start from early years where teachers can give greater attention to affective factors such as confidence, motivation, enjoyment and valuing of mathematics.

In 2012, across OECD countries, high-performing students whose parents do not like mathematics were on average 73 per cent more likely to feel helpless when they faced a mathematics problem than high-performing children of parents who like mathematics. This points to

“Too many pupils have been socialised to hate maths”



the importance of parents socially inscribing positive attitudes towards mathematics.

There is positive news for Sunak's policy in the latest PISA figures: England's pupils have risen the rankings for mathematics, making us one of the top-performing countries. Even more encouragingly, 96 per cent of pupils say they want to do well in the subject.

However, only 44 per cent report mathematics as their favourite subject at age 15. That is something schools can and should be doing something about, and it must involve improving the mathematical (and STEM-related) experiences of young people. We must be able to systematically and effectively address their queries about the value of mathematics, embed attitudes that underscore the future utility of being mathematically competent, and underscore its role as an enabler for developing STEM literacy.

The Diversity and Inclusion in STEM report acknowledges the lifelong benefits of STEM-related skills. It notes that opportunities to develop these skills are not evenly distributed and calls specifically for addressing female under-representation in STEM by ensuring equitable access to STEM subjects in school.

Doing so will be crucial to more students pursue mathematics to 18 (and beyond).

As well as the economic benefits of increasing the high-skill, high-pay STEM workforce, there are strong personal and social reasons to make this work. The near future is likely to be defined by unprecedented and controversial challenges – from AI to climate change – that will be best navigated by highly numerate citizens.

But these are all the reasons they should do mathematics. Now we must convince them that they can.

# Opinion

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## British Science Week



**DAVID THOMAS**  
CEO, Axiom Maths

### How to close the maths and science ‘enjoyment gap’

**New research reveals stark disparities in teenagers’ enjoyment of maths and science – a regional gap we must close to be a science superpower, writes David Thomas**

This week is British Science Week, a ten-day celebration of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) across the UK. But, despite this being a nationwide event, new research has found a stark “enjoyment gap” between London and the rest of Britain when it comes to learning maths and science in school.

A YouGov survey of more than 1,000 11-to-16-year-olds commissioned by Teach First found that 83 per cent of young people in London enjoy learning science compared to just 68 per cent outside of the capital.

The gap is even wider for maths, with 79.5 per cent of London-based 11-to-16-year-olds enjoying the subject, against just 57 per cent of those living in the rest of Britain. This is because disadvantage looks different in different parts of the country.

I used to teach in central London. We had prestigious STEM employers queuing up to meet our pupils. Children saw the

opportunities that would be open to them if they did well in maths and science, and I can think of numerous cases where this sparked a deeply held interest.

Sadly, roles in new and emerging STEM industries are “disproportionately concentrated in London and the southeast”. Britain is attracting investment in AI from the world’s best firms, but again these jobs tend to be in London. It’s just harder to be excited about jobs that you don’t get to see and understand.

The differing nature of disadvantage affects educational outcomes too. London outperforms the rest of the country in exams, including in STEM. This has been variously attributed to school improvement interventions like the London Challenge, and to the impact of immigration. Either way, there is a correlation between achievement and enjoyment; pupils are more likely to enjoy things they are doing well at.

We cannot continue to accept this situation. It lets children down, and it lets our country down. An estimated shortage of 173,000 STEM workers is costing our economy £1.5 billion a year. So how do we engage all young people with the joys of STEM?

First, we need more young people to realise the STEM careers that



“ It’s harder to be excited about jobs you don’t see

are on offer. Our careers education has to bring this knowledge to pupils in all communities, even those without high-profile STEM employers. Children in rural and coastal communities could benefit from blended work experience placements provided online, for example. And in an age of remote work, geography shouldn’t be a barrier to success in STEM careers.

Second, we need every child to be taught STEM by a well-qualified teacher. Last year, just 17 per cent of the physics teachers, 36 per cent of the computing teachers and 63 per cent of the maths teachers we needed were hired. Without proper guidance from an inspiring teacher, we risk letting down a generation of young people – especially those from disadvantaged communities where teacher shortages are biting hardest.

Finally, regional inequalities exist, but there is also a negative perception of maths nationwide that we must address.

Research by Axiom Maths, the charity I lead, has found that perceptions of maths among pupils

take a negative hit as they move from year 6 into secondary school.

Twice as many of the highest attainers from year 6 are likely to think maths is boring in year 7, and while the lowest attainers in year 6 do enjoy maths more in year 7, by year 9 their positive attitudes towards the subject are declining again.

This means by year 9, a lot of pupils who could have pursued maths to a higher level have decided it’s not for them.

To keep pupils engaged in maths, we at Axiom are offering to partner with secondary schools to fund maths champions to identify and nurture promising mathematicians. They run maths circles, where pupils leave stress and tests behind and take part in maths for the sheer joy of it.

But if we are to truly shift the dial, we must widen opportunity beyond London and ensure all children can appreciate the joys of learning STEM. Only then will we be able to realise the UK’s ambition of becoming a science superpower.

## Solutions

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK

## DANIEL JENNINGS

Partner and defamation expert,  
Shakespeare Martineau

## How to handle unverified claims when recruiting

**Daniel Jennings offers advice on keeping pupils, adults and schools safe amid social media-fuelled allegations against potential recruits**

Unsubstantiated claims against potential job candidates can spread like wildfire, particularly with social media pouring oil on the flames. No one should be held back from a career in education by malicious claims, but safeguarding accusations are particularly inflammatory.

Unverified or anonymous claims leave schools in tension; with such claims difficult to pursue but impossible to ignore. So how can schools navigate such unsubstantiated claims and get to the truth?

In the first instance, key decision-makers in education settings should always take any potential claims seriously, even if they appear unsubstantiated. This is because schools are unique in terms of the exposure of vulnerable individuals, including children and young adults, to potential harm.

Past cases of sexual abuse claims demonstrate the dangers of overlooking critical information against potential candidates. In many of these cases, rumours or unproven claims were never investigated at all.

This is not to say that schools

should act on baseless rumours. But they should pay attention to these unproven claims and be thorough throughout the hiring process to ensure that all relevant information is properly considered. Indeed, they may be able to easily dismiss unsubstantiated allegations after a brief process.

One of the best ways for school leaders to navigate unsubstantiated claims when hiring potential candidates is by setting clear eligibility criteria and parameters at the outset. It is important to identify the qualities sought, matters that might cause concern and understand the school's policies around safeguarding, for example. If a candidate fails to meet any of these criteria, it could well signal a potential problem.

Another way to understand the truth during unsubstantiated claims is to request detailed references from former employers.

A referee has two responsibilities: to the candidate and the potential employer. They must ensure that the statement is truthful, precise, and fair. If a reference is too brief and lacks detail, school leaders should inquire as to why. If the school discovers any concerns, they must not hesitate to dig deeper and ask more questions.

It is additionally important to use specific questioning techniques to assess the validity



“ Such claims are difficult to pursue but impossible to ignore

of unsubstantiated claims made against potential job candidates. In situations where employers may not be legally required to provide references, a refusal to do so by a candidate's previous employer could be an indicator of potential problems.

If school leaders have concerns but are not sure of the questions to ask or how to address them, it is advisable to seek professional guidance. Ultimately, headteachers and governors are not often trained or experienced to handle the more complex or delicate of these scenarios and may require third-party support from a solicitor.

Achieving the right outcome is crucial, but avoiding problems in the process is equally important. Therefore, decision-makers must not shy away from asking the necessary questions.

As a school leader or a key decision maker, it is essential to carefully examine any information you receive and assess the weight to give to it. This includes verifying whether the person in question has been thoroughly investigated, if there are any witnesses or

statements that have been accurately recorded, and whether the appropriate procedures were followed.

Moreover, it is critical to ascertain whether the individual in question was given a fair chance to present their side of the story. As this latter requirement is a subjective matter, if school leaders have doubts about whether hiring the candidate is safe, seeking advice can be helpful.

If school leaders go ahead with the hiring process despite a claim, then it is important for schools to have a strategy in place on how they will handle the situation if any issues or questions from concerned staff or parents arise. The individual and the organisation will need some self-protection. This should be considered from the beginning of the hiring process.

Overall, it is crucial for school leaders and key decision-makers to fully understand any concerns or unsubstantiated claims and seek professional advice if necessary. By taking these steps, schools can minimise potential risks and create a safe and supportive environment for everyone involved.

# THE REVIEW

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE PRIMARY CLASSROOM

**Author:** Gemma Clark

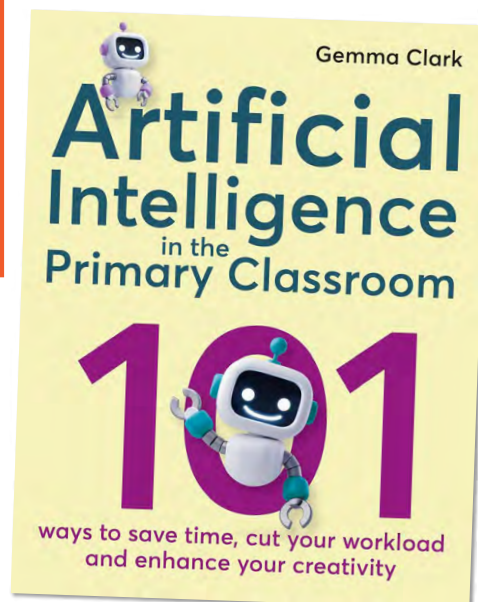
**Publisher:** Crown House

**Publication date:** 10 March 2024

**ISBN:** 1785837141

**Reviewer:** Stephen Lockyer, Primary teacher

BOOK  
TV  
FILM  
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RESOURCE



The future is here, and it's pretty frustrating, if I'm honest. We can speak in real time to people on the other side of the planet, yet I have to use my Teacher Voice with Alexa to get her to do anything beyond setting a ten-minute timer. As a child, I was promised hoverboards dammit, not greasy teens on electric scooters cutting me up on the pavement.

So to AI, and by AI we mean of course either Midjourney for images or ChatGPT for text. With a nonchalant ambivalence as to whether it would be good or bad, I predicted just fifteen months ago in these pages that it would make a significant and rapid difference to our jobs.

And here we are. Not only is AI living and breathing in the hallowed halls of our classrooms, but it's earned its own edu-book of practical tips. Plenty of mighty tomes on its potential, its limitations and its complicated ethics have preceded it and been roundly ignored. AI in the primary classroom, I suspect, will not be. That alone worries me.

As a creative person, much as it irks me hugely, I still use AI sometimes for ideas, if I have 12 and need three more.

And that's in part the beauty. To have ChatGPT output something creative, you genuinely must be creative with your input. It is learning and responsive, so you can't just rush in and give one command, hoping it will understand your every nuance; you need to refine and chat with it, giving it feedback to improve what you

are asking it to do. A bit like you might with a student, just with less green pen.

The real art of AI then isn't what it can do so much as how you get it to do what you want it to. Which is where this book both shines and falls down.

If I wanted to get ChatGPT to write this book, this would be my start:

Prompt: You are a teacher. Write down 100 different prompts which teachers might use in class, and have an example of your output for each of them.

In summary, this is what this book is. At first, I was frustrated; I was hoping for so much more: depth, nuance, ideas for how to build up content of a quality good enough to be used quickly and effectively, and simple tips like telling it in your prompt that you are a teacher in England using the national curriculum (which alone drastically changes the content you'll get).

But then I thought more about perhaps who this book is for. This is, in all honesty, not a book for me – an inveterate tinker merchant. Instead, this book is to help teachers and TAs see just the widest range of what is possible, and give those who need a jumpstart on writing prompts.

You see, ChatGPT is as dumb as your Alexa, just with a better back catalogue and hopefully less stalky. Garbage in, garbage out. If you write poor prompts, you will get poor content. This book will show you prompts that work, which is where the real gold lies.

My biggest concern about the book is its honesty.

I'm a big fan of the blood, sweat and tears of a task, the origin story, the effort behind the final piece. The prompts and resulting tasks have of course been edited into a book, but there's nothing to show the journey of each prompt, the refinement which occurred, the changes made.

"Who cares?" some will cry, "We want to eat the meal, not see how it's made."

But if we are learning the tool, we are the chefs, not the consumers. That being the case, we surely want more teachers to be genuinely proficient in using AI tools, and that means understanding prompt evolution – the journey.

I guess you must start somewhere, but starting here seems like a dangerous shortcut.

★★★★☆  
Rating



**Jess Mahdavi-Gladwell**

Deputy head, Robson House, Camden

In a week that saw our school community mark World Book Day and International Women's Day, I've been reflecting on the importance of curriculum in developing understanding, values and shared knowledge. This week's blogosphere has indulged me with plenty of stimulus.

**MORE THAN WORDS**

For some children, attending school is a huge challenge. This blog by Skylark Partnership CEO Jim Bowyer for the AP and SEND Network reflects on the updated statutory guidance regarding the education of those unable to attend school because of health reasons.



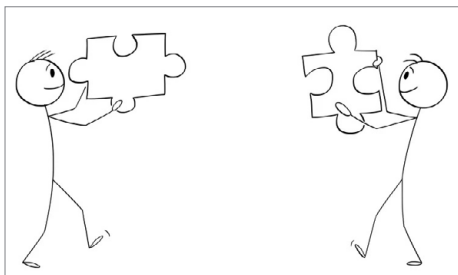
Pointing out that the new guidance does not remove the ability of schools to remove children from their roll when they are not well enough to attend, Bowyer draws links with the experiences of the late Sir Tim Brighouse, who himself had a negative experience in the first secondary school he attended.

Bowyer's commentary on the move away from using the term 'school phobic' made

me think about the power of words, both on the experiences of the young people we serve and also on our feelings about our service.

**FEAR OF BELONGING**

Lisa Cherry is renowned for her knowledge and communication of the impact of childhood trauma, particularly on those who are care experienced. As such, her work is highly relevant to many who find school attendance difficult or impossible. In her latest newsletter, Cherry focuses on the power of belonging.



Many of the children we teach who would benefit from us having a deeper understanding of the impact of their life experiences and their need for (and fear of) belonging. That sense of belonging is something we often seek for ourselves; think of all the times we speak with pride of 'our school' or 'my class'. It's also something we naturally seek to build for others, especially in our efforts to meet the needs of all our pupils.

Cherry's blog is a useful reminder that to be inclusive, we need to be mindful of the risks of 're-traumatisation' in the pursuance of that goal.

**INNER LEADERSHIP**

When reflecting on the best ways to support the varied strengths and needs of the children in our classrooms, the value of 'inner leadership' as described here by Viv Grant could be considered key. Grant defines the concept an 'inner beacon' that guides our personal and professional growth.

The blog is aimed at senior leaders, but we are all leaders in our own classrooms and I believe that this is relevant to us all. Confronting uncomfortable truths is something we can all benefit from.

While more and more senior leaders in schools appear to be valuing coaching to support career development, those of us who are classroom-based can also benefit from this kind of support. What better use can there be for a digital staffroom?

**CULTURE CATALYSING CURRICULUM**

I was lucky enough to hear Lekha Sharma speak in February at an event organised by The Step Up Network. In this article for the Impact journal, she writes about the importance of integrating cultural knowledge with curricular knowledge to achieve sustained improvements to the quality of education we provide.

Sharma makes useful links between clear values and an effective curriculum. She also makes a compelling case for the importance of creating the right conditions for clarity, in terms of curriculum structure and norms.

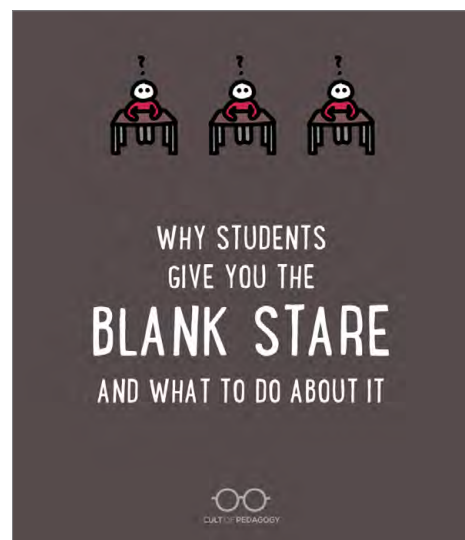
Her emphasis on this strategy's positive impact on staff wellbeing left me with a clear sense of why I should follow her on this journey and how to do it well.

**A THOUSAND MILES**

Finally, this week, allow me to segue from 'a journey of thousand miles' to a more immediate problem we can all take steps to solve: the thousand-mile stare.

In this article (and the interview it's based on), Blake Harvard gives four explanations for the 'blank stare' we're all familiar with on the faces of our learners – however well-crafted our curriculum and lessons.

With thoughtful potential solutions and a focus on holding the needs of learners at the heart of our solution-finding, it speaks of our shared values as a profession and gives me hope that true inclusion isn't as far as it sometimes feels.



Click the links to access the blogs and podcasts

# The Knowledge

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



## What does inclusion look like in practice today?

**Toby Greany, Professor of Education, University of Nottingham and Jodie Pennacchia, Research fellow in educational equity, University of Birmingham**

What does "inclusion" mean to pupils, teachers and leaders today? How do relatively more inclusive secondary schools approach and practise inclusion? These were the questions that drove a new research study – called *Belonging Schools* – by the University of Nottingham on behalf of education charity Teach First.

This research is needed for four reasons.

First, the inclusion landscape is changing rapidly; one indicator of this is the rise in number of children and young people with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Second, there has been a limited amount of research into inclusion in mainstream schools since the pandemic.

Third, there is a strong argument that how inclusion is conceived impacts on how it is practised.

Fourth, there is no consensus on what inclusion means or 'should' look like in contemporary mainstream schools.

What is clear is that we are seeing the beginnings of a shift in how inclusion is conceptualised. Rather than seeing special education as the dominant issue, many now see it as one issue within a broader 'inclusion for all' agenda.

This stance clearly recognises that some children face systemic disadvantage, but argues that everyone has needs and that supporting these is everyone's business.

Interestingly, our new research – which included a national survey and focus groups with school and trust leaders as well as case studies of six schools in challenging contexts that are achieving relatively good outcomes for both inclusion and attainment – highlights that schools themselves have different conceptualisations of inclusion.

The six case study schools all adopted an 'inclusion for all' approach, but the focus groups and survey revealed a range of perspectives among schools more widely. One common orientation was on remedial work with children displaying particular needs and characteristics.



### 'There is a case for a national indicator of inclusion'

At the level of practice, the six case study schools were working in different ways to achieve inclusion for all. Some of these differences were surprising, even contentious.

For example, one school had stopped permanently excluding students and had closed its isolation room, while the others all used both approaches when necessary. All six schools used either internally-run or external AP, albeit sparingly. This is one of the reasons why we conclude that there is no 'one best way' to achieve inclusion.

But this is not to say that we did not identify clear commonalities among the schools; we did. Of these, what stood out most was the centrality of human relationships underpinned by shared values in all the case study schools.

These relationships and values created a sense of belonging – of students being seen, known, cared for, understood and supported in ways that best meet their needs – from which inclusion was an outcome.

In conducting the research, we were struck by two issues which, we believe, justify the case for a national indicator of inclusion that could be applied to all schools.

First, we found it surprisingly hard to identify any objective measures that we could use to identify 'inclusive' case study schools. In practice

we did this by drawing on the prototype School Quality Index, developed by FFT Datalab, which could potentially offer a basis for an official measure.

Second, we saw that the case study schools faced unsustainable pressures, largely because they had become the victims of their own success. They had become magnets for children with additional needs, precisely because they were known locally as 'the inclusive school'. While the schools' leaders were proud of their reputation, they argued that other local schools should play their part in an inclusive system.

Defining a national inclusion measure that could be applied to all schools would not be straightforward, although we see potential in Labour's proposal for school report cards. Care would be needed to avoid unintended consequences, including accentuating the magnet school phenomenon by making such schools even more identifiable.

Nevertheless, it's clear we need a national approach: not to have one risks continuing the status quo and letting less inclusive schools off the hook.

*Belonging Schools* and this article were both co-authored with Eleanor Bernardes (University of Nottingham) and Jenny Graham (The Difference)

Week in

# Westminster

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

## FRIDAY

Last year education secretary Gillian Keegan snubbed attending the ASCL conference amid the pay dispute reaching a stalemate. But this year she was listed to speak twice – a double bill!

We're sure this was because of a schedule change, but we like to think it's her way of making it up to the sector.

As always, we got the full Keegan Comms™ treatment, which this week included the controversial punch-line (sorry) that she would have “probably punched” Ofsted inspectors who were “rude” during a visit to a school in her constituency.

She also congratulated herself for getting a smattering of applause from the packed audience in Liverpool.

Alas, this was for her assertion that Liverpool is the best football team in the world (and nothing to do with her record as education secretary).

And then, after incoming ASCL general secretary Pepe Di'Iasio quoted the Liverpool anthem, Keegan told headteachers that “you'll never walk alone” – 10/10 for cringe value.

## SATURDAY

After Keegan's punchy (again, sorry) remarks, the question of the weekend was whether delegates have ever felt the urge to punch an Ofsted inspector in the face. Pure dystopia.

Ever-diplomatic Sir Ian Bauckham, the interim Ofqual boss, replied: “I have been at the receiving end of a number of Ofsted inspections and the experiences have been mostly positive but with some variations over the years. And I have shared my views of Ofsted inspections using the established channels where that has happened.”

## MONDAY

The year is 2002. We've just been to Staples to buy scented gel pens so we can smell coconut and cola to make our in-class tests bearable.

But, sadly, 2024 has put an end to that after new SATs guidance this week made clear that “pupils must not use gel pens during the KS2 tests”. Woke gone mad.

\*\*\*

During a Lords' committee hearing today on a report overhauling 11 to 16 education (which the government wholly rejected), former education secretary Kenneth Baker hit back.

“The trouble is, since 2010, it's the DfE that has run education. I've known the last 10 secretaries of state and they were a poor bunch – apart from Justine Greening – and they've been cradled in the arms of the civil servants and this is the DfE speaking and defending the present system root and branch, and I'm depressed by that.”

\*\*\*

Back to pen and paper timetables under schools minister Damian Hinds. MPs on the education select committee raised concerns about pupils being able to access online timetables if they aren't allowed their phones.

Hinds said the government had “thought about” timetables but, “to be honest, we don't think it is insurmountable to copy out a timetable”.

## WEDNESDAY

According to the DfE, a “common misconception that some schools have about the National Tutoring Programme is that their funding allocation must be spent in full”.

Erm ... that's the first we heard about that.

Probably a better “misconception” belongs to the government: that it thinks schools have enough pupil premium cash to just start tutoring all their kids when the extra tuition cash ends this year.

## THURSDAY

Many in the sector were concerned after an investigation found Sir Paul Marshall, who founded the Ark academy trust and is also chair of governors, had liked some pretty offensive far-right social media posts.

When questioned in the commons, former education secretary Michael Gove said Marshall was a “distinguished philanthropist and a supporter of Ark academies which ... have done so much to improve the lives of disadvantaged children from a variety of minority backgrounds”.

What he didn't mention was that Marshall has donated £500,000 to the Conservative party, or that he has also donated £13,000 personally to Gove!

\*\*\*

Not only are ministers trumpeting on X how 90 per cent of schools are now rated ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’, up from 68 per cent in 2010. They are now sending it out in an official press release – complete with even more trumpeting quotes.

The figures are correct, but there are a few big caveats.

For instance: Inspection grades changed in 2012. ‘Requires improvement’ replaced ‘satisfactory’, and many schools jumped to ‘good’ at their next inspection as a result.

Secondly, ‘outstanding’ schools were exempt from routine inspection for a decade, and many are now losing their top grades after that exemption was lifted.





# VANDYKE UPPER SCHOOL

## HEADTEACHER

September 2024

This is an exciting opportunity for an outstanding leader to lead our vibrant and thriving school community. Vandyke Upper School is a highly successful and oversubscribed school, with a talented and supportive staff who provide students with excellent teaching and pastoral care. Our retiring Headteacher leaves a wonderful legacy of shared values, inclusive culture and collaborative practice. This creates a distinctive atmosphere around school which enables students to achieve their very best. Our new Headteacher will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of the school, whilst building on these strong foundations and bringing new energy and ideas to our learning journey. The governors would welcome interest from both experienced Headteachers looking for a new challenge, or strong candidates who are looking for their first Headship.

Vandyke Upper School is a very popular school with 1520 students on roll including 436 in the sixth form. This is due to its continued success, with a solidly good OFSTED judgement. Students achieve very well, through high quality teaching and learning, and the delivery of a broad and ambitious curriculum which is well planned to meet students' needs. The school holds the Sportsmark award, complementing an extensive extra-curricular programme.

### The Governors are seeking a Headteacher who:

- Provides consistently high-quality professional leadership for the school
- Can inspire and motivate staff, students, parents and governors to work towards and achieve the vision, values and aims of the school.
- Creates a culture of continuous improvement based on mutual respect and high expectations.
- Creates a productive, caring and inclusive learning environment
- Upholds ambitious educational standards for all students
- Is approachable and leads by example
- Has proven capacity for strategic leadership, demonstrating financial acumen and the capacity to maximise opportunities for the school
- Has the ability to forge constructive relationships beyond the school to ensure that Vandyke Upper School continues to be outward-facing

### In return, we will provide you with:

- The opportunity to make a good school even better
- Excellent facilities and resources, coupled with sound finances
- A strong school team that enjoys working together to a common purpose
- Students who are self-disciplined, engaged in their learning and who participate fully in the life of the school
- A highly motivated and capable Governing Board
- An opportunity to influence the local educational landscape

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## Headteacher

Due to the retirement of the Headteacher, the Trustees seek to appoint a talented and exceptional individual who can lead our school into the future.

This is an exciting and unique opportunity for a highly effective and inspiring school leader to move this school forward and improve outcomes for all pupils. The recruitment of dynamic, committed, and inspirational staff is at the heart of our Trust's vision.

At our Trust, we believe that every child is a special individual, capable of extraordinary things. All schools support and challenge every child to do what they think they cannot, to persist, to work hard and to be their best. We are looking for a Headteacher who shares our values and has the vision, drive, and resilience to lead The Bromley Pensnett Primary School,

securing rapid improvement whilst also bringing leadership capacity that supports other Trust schools to learn from each other and beyond. We prioritise staff wellbeing and are deeply committed to investing in staff at every level of our organisation through clear professional development pathways and opportunities.

Interested candidates are encouraged to contact James Hill, Executive Director of School Improvement to discuss the opportunity in more detail.  
Email [jhill@drbignitemat.org](mailto:jhill@drbignitemat.org)

To apply for this role, please download an application form from the Jobs Section on the drb Ignite Multi Academy Trust website:  
[www.drbignitemat.org](http://www.drbignitemat.org)



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