

SCHOOLS WEEK

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

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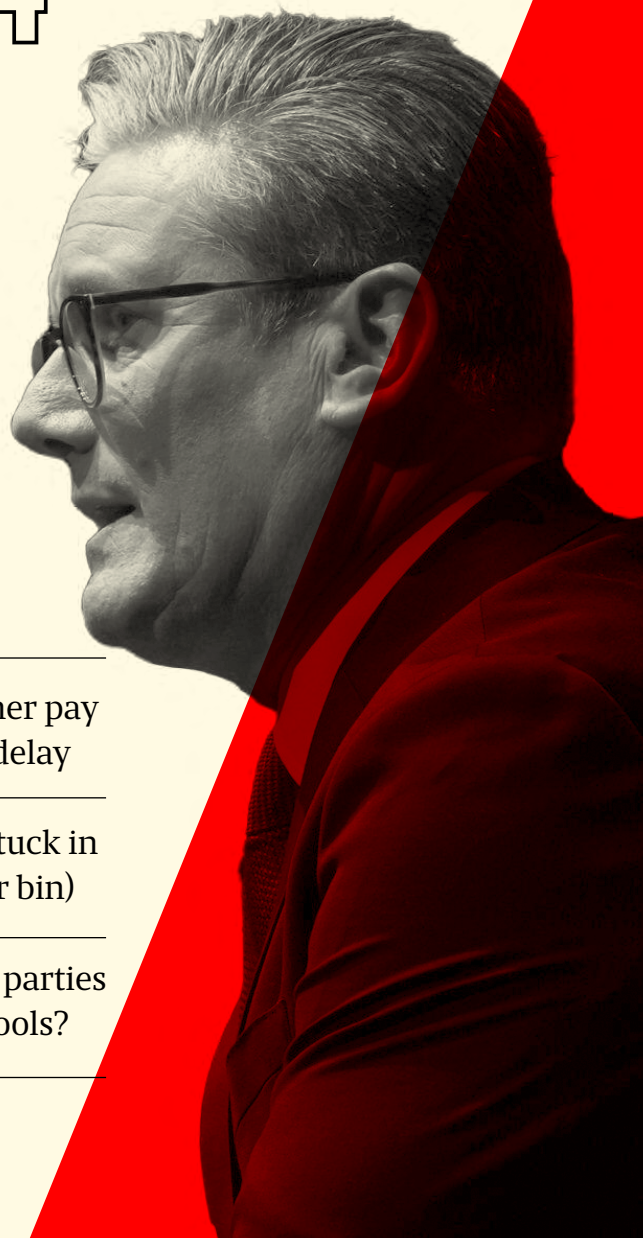
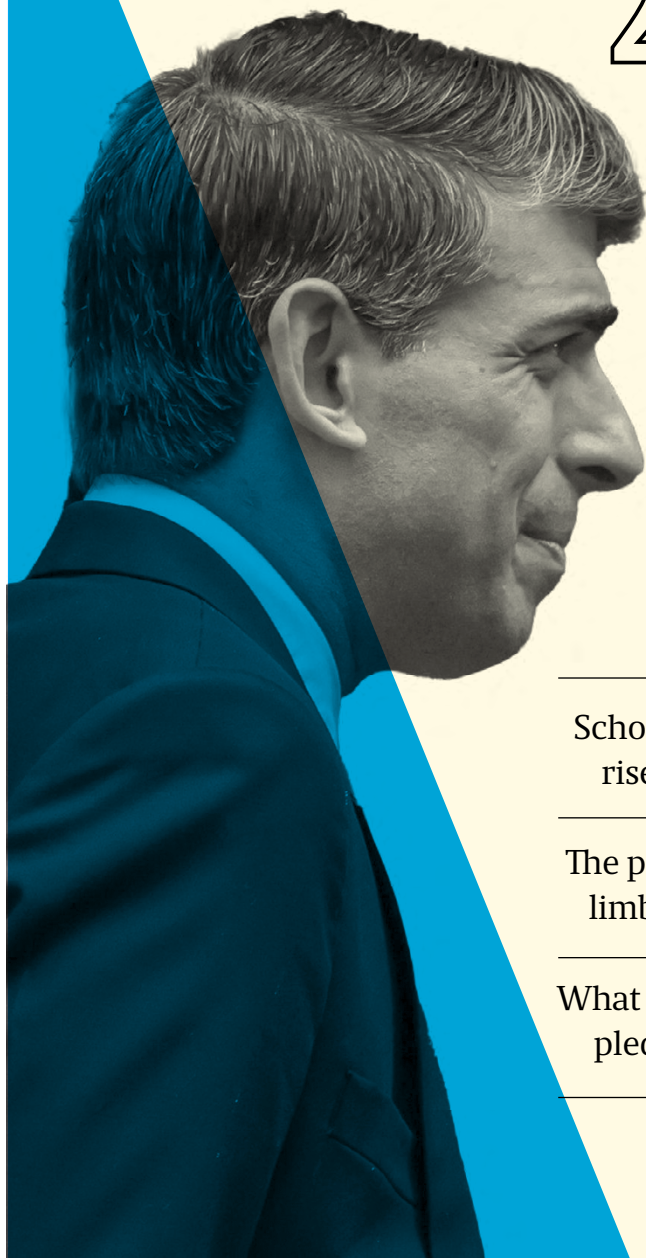
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WEEK

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It's clear from the polls the country wants change. As we report this week, the education sector is more supportive of Labour than the wider public, with 59 per cent of teachers planning to vote for the party.

There has for some time now been what has felt like a sense of optimism in the sector about the likely change of government.

Sector leaders long sidelined under current ministers, who have increasingly relied on a small inner-circle of sector experts, are now having their voices heard in Labour's policy debate.

At the same time, it feels like the government has given up on governing, at a time when some of the sector's biggest problems are worsening.

The few policies that were promised will now be delayed as we enter the pre-election purdah, and potentially canned if there is a change in government (page 6).

But the decision by Rishi Sunak to call a July election puts Labour – if the polls are to be believed – in a really tricky position.

They already faced a mountain to climb

in sorting crises like recruitment and retention, funding and SEND.

But now a new Labour government may also very quickly have to come up with a pay offer for teachers from September, with pressure to provide funding to match.

Labour's messaging has been clear: 'there's no extra cash until the economy is back on track'.

This means their first big schools decision could be one that disappoints the sector. Unions are pushing hard for a pay rise that makes up for previous real-term cuts. And they want it fully funded.

The government had told the STRB pay rises this year must be "more sustainable" – and suggested schools had headroom to deliver rises of around 2 per cent.

If Labour is going to better that, it's going to have to magic up the money from somewhere. That would not be in-keeping with its pre-election messaging.

School staff may have to recalibrate their expectations. Those expecting an immediate sea change to a land of plenty may well be disappointed.

Most read online this week:



- 1 **Ofsted chief keen on 'chartered status' for inspectors**
- 2 **School wants wider review after three Ofsted visits in two years**
- 3 **General election 2024: What does it mean for schools?**
- 4 **Ofsted: Teachers 'underwhelmed' by training opportunities**
- 5 **Unions: £1,290 support staff pay offer 'falls short'**

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Don't let election delay new pay deal, union leaders warn

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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Education leaders are "seeking assurances" from ministers that the election campaign will not bring the process for setting teacher pay for September to an abrupt halt.

Shortly before the poll was announced, leaders wrote to Gillian Keegan to demand that the education secretary "immediately" publish the recommendations from the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB), along with the government's pay and funding offer for 2024-25.

Ministers had pledged to speed up the pay-setting process, with announcements in recent years having come right at the end of the summer term, throwing school budget-setting into turmoil.

But the timing of the election on July 4 raises the prospect that a decision this year could come even later than usual, and be left to a new government to make.

The government will soon enter the pre-election "purdah" period, which will heavily restrict decisions on key issues that could be seen to influence the election, with announcements also outlawed. (See page 6 for the full list of impacted policies).

Pepe Di'Iasio, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said his organisation was "in the process of checking how far the STRB process can continue during the election campaign and are seeking assurances that it will not come to an abrupt halt".

He added: "School leaders urgently require clarity. The financial pressures that schools are under and the need to set budgets for future academic years do not disappear during an election campaign and steps need to be taken to ensure this process keeps moving towards a satisfactory resolution."

Education secretary Gillian Keegan had previously told the STRB that teacher pay rises this year needed to be at a "more sustainable level".

The Department for Education said it believes there is only headroom in school budgets for schools to raise overall spending by 1.2 per cent, or £600 million.

Ministers have previously estimated that each percentage point increase in teacher pay costs



about £270 million – meaning the headroom would only allow for a pay rise of around 2 per cent.

It leaves the potential new Labour government with the problem of both finding a solution quickly – as pay rises for other public sector workers will all have to be decided – and also finding the cash to pay for it.

Unions are pushing hard for another fully funded and above-inflation pay increase.

"Without such action, the damage to the competitive position of teaching will not be repaired and teacher shortages impacting on pupils' education will continue," said Daniel Kebede, general secretary of the National Education Union.

He added that teachers and leaders would also be "suspicious if the government makes no announcement on teacher pay, even though it has received the STRB report".

Whichever party forms the next government will also have to make swift decisions about school funding. The spending review held in 2021 only set budgets until the 2024-25 financial year, so schools face uncertainty about how much they will receive next year.

Rachel Reeves, the shadow chancellor, has said she will conduct a spending review "quickly" if Labour wins, but indicated the party will not set out detailed spending plans before the election.

She told the BBC in March she

was under "no illusions" about the state of public finances, adding: "It is clear that the inheritance a Labour government would have, if we do win the election, will be the worst since the Second World War."

"I have to be honest, we are not going to be able to turn things around straight away, but we will get to work on that."

The Conservatives, similarly, are likely to hold a spending review in the autumn if they win. It means it may be unlikely that either party will say how much money they will give to schools during the campaign.

In a letter to Keegan this week, the NEU, NASUWT, NAHT and ASCL unions warned that the government would "pay a heavy political price at the general election for any continued failure to make the investment needed to support our education service".

They said there was "no good reason for you to delay publishing the STRB report and compelling reasons to publish it now".

Meanwhile a manifesto published by the Headteachers' Roundtable this week stated:

"Pay settlements cannot represent an annual circus of delay and disappointment. Leaders must be able to plan over time for pay progression.

"All staff working in schools must know the sector provides consistently competitive salaries for all to pursue a rewarding career."



Rachel Reeves

Explainer: What the general election means for schools

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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A general election will be held on Thursday, July 4, Rishi Sunak has announced, saying that this will be the “moment for Britain to choose its future”.

Big issues for schools will include school funding, teacher pay, the SEND system crisis and crumbling buildings. However, YouGov polling shows that just 12 per cent of the wider public think education is one of the one most important issues facing the country – way below issues such as the economy, health and immigration.

Parliament is due to be dissolved next week. At some point the pre-election “purdah” period will kick in, preventing government announcements. In 2019 that happened when Parliament was dissolved, but there is no hard-and-fast rule.

The election also means that many schools will face disruption as they close so they can be used as polling stations on the day.

How do teachers plan to vote?

A Teacher Tapp survey this week found 59 per cent of teachers planned to vote Labour, 8 per cent planned to vote Lib Dem and just 3 per cent Conservatives. Fourteen per cent did not know.

According to the BBC's national poll tracker, Labour was polling at 44 per cent nationally on May 20, compared to the Conservatives on 23 per cent, Reform on 11 per cent and the Liberal Democrats on 10 per cent.

When asked by Teacher Tapp to choose one issue they would prioritise being fixed, nearly half of primary teachers said funding. For secondary teachers, pupil behaviour was the most popular (31 per cent), followed by funding (23 per cent).

What has Labour pledged?

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has made education one of his key “missions”. Money raised from ending tax breaks for private schools will be used to recruit 6,500 more teachers, although the party has not said how this will be achieved.

A “national excellence programme” for school improvement, £210 million to give teachers a right to CPD, reform of Ofsted to scrap single-phrase judgments, free primary breakfast clubs and access to counsellors for all pupils have also been pledged.



Labour will review curriculum and assessment, create new regional school improvement teams and introduce £2,400 retention payments for teachers who complete the two-year early career framework.

What do teachers think about Labour's policies?

A Teacher Tapp poll found Labour's pledges on mental health were most popular among the profession. Open-access mental health hubs in every community came top, with pledges on more mental health professionals in second and third.

Replacing Ofsted grades with a “balanced scorecard” came fourth, and breakfast clubs in every primary came fifth.

The only policy with large disagreement between some teachers was the party's plan to charge VAT on private school fees.

Meanwhile secondary teachers were much less likely to favour the party's curriculum review policy.

What will the Tories' pitch be?

Expect ministers to focus on the Conservatives' record on education as they seek to cling onto power. They have already started sharing the misleading statement that the proportion of ‘good’ or better schools has risen from 68 per cent to 89 per cent on their watch.

The party will also shout about the country's strong rankings in the PISA league tables as

evidence that their reforms over the past 14 years have worked.

When announcing the election, Sunak said the government had “reformed education and our children are now the best readers in the Western world”.

In relation to new policies, the pitch is less clear, but the prime minister will no doubt speak a lot about his plans for a new “advanced British standard” qualification to replace A-levels and T-levels and make all pupils study English and maths to 18.

What about the other parties?

The Liberal Democrats have pledged to increase per-pupil funding above inflation each year, to extend the pupil premium and free school meals, reform exams, inspections and the curriculum and spend £390 million a year on tutoring.

Reform UK proposes to ban “gender ideology” and “critical race theory” in schools, give private schools a 20 per cent tax break, double the number of pupil referral units and teach home economics and social media risk in schools.

The Green Party wants to extend early years education to the age of six, replace the national curriculum with a set of “learning entitlements”, scrap SATs and league tables.

It will replace Ofsted with a National Council of Educational Excellence, pay governors and “integrate academies and free schools into the local authority school system”.

The schools policies now in limbo as purdah looms

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOTH

Policy proposals for schools and academies will be delayed or binned now a general election has been called for July 4.

Government enters the pre-election “purdah” period on Saturday where public bodies are restricted in making both announcements and decisions that could influence voting decisions.

Even if the Conservatives retain power there is no guarantee a new Tory administration would keep current plans on policy and commercial contracts.

Bodies including government departments, local authorities, quangos such as Oak National Academy, and non-ministerial departments including Ofsted are affected.

Previously, purdah has meant school funding agreements could not be signed by civil servants – impacting new free schools and academy conversions.

Ofsted does not publish reports making council-wide judgments and might not release ‘inadequate’ reports in cases subject to “significant local political campaigning”.

Any decisions not made by Saturday are likely to be stuck in election limbo.

What does this all mean for schools? Here's your trusty Schools Week explainer...

The consultations: MSL and ABS binned?

There are at least seven consultations on proposed new policies that will be affected.

The **Advanced British Standard** consultation closed in March. A white paper on the plans to reform qualifications – which included compulsory maths and English to age 18 – was also promised later this year. Labour has suggested it will junk the plan should it form the next government.

Labour has also vowed to row back on the proposed **minimum service levels** that would apply to schools where staff are striking. Government has yet to respond to a consultation on this issue which closed in January.

The government has also not responded to a consultation on **non-statutory elective home education** which would ask councils to maintain voluntary registers on children not in school.

A consultation on draft guidance for schools on **gender questioning children** closed in March



and a response has not yet been published.

The recently launched consultation on new statutory **relationships, sex and health education guidance** is due to run until July. Government is also currently seeking views on proposals to **lift the 50 per cent admissions cap for faith schools**. The consultation closes in June. Elsewhere it is seeking views on new national standards for **unregistered alternative provision**.

The policies: Workload and curriculum plans up in air

A final set of recommendations from the **workload reduction taskforce** was due this spring. Ministers had promised to cut teacher workload by five hours a week.

The sector has also been waiting for the promised **2019 recruitment and retention strategy refresh**. Both are now up in the air.

A **model history curriculum**, first promised in October 2021, is yet to see the light of day. Last year the DfE said it would be published in 2024.

The **cultural education plan**, first pledged in March 2022, remains unpublished too. In February the DfE said it would be published “in the coming months”.

Ministers are also yet to consult on content for a new **natural history GCSE**, due to be introduced by September next year.

Meanwhile, the **SEND reforms** are currently being trialled, with decisions on whether to nationally

roll out local inclusion plans and national standards falling to the next government.

Other stuff: Teacher pay, Ofsted and academisation

One of the biggest impacts will likely be the **teacher pay-setting process** for September – which is likely to be delayed until after the election.

Ofsted's 'Big Listen' exercise also closes next week, meaning no decisions can be taken before the polls in July. Labour intends to consult on scrapping its grading system and replacing it with a ‘report card’.

About 800 maintained schools are also in the **pipeline for academisation**, something which could be slowed down.

Conservative MP Flick Drummond's private members bill for a **register of children not in school**, which had government support, will not progress when parliament dissolves next week. But Labour has committed to implement the policy.

An “independent” **review of Oak National Academy**, due to be completed by September, will fall to the next government.

Interviews for **Ofqual's permanent chief regulator** ended in April, but a preferred candidate is yet to be announced – another decision that could spill over.

The government was also due to respond to the **Khan Review** on teacher harassment before the summer break.



Flick Drummond

DfE churn endangers next government's reforms

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE

The number of civil servants leaving the Department for Education has almost doubled since before the pandemic, prompting concerns about its capacity to carry out the reforms of the next government.

Data shows that 1,087 staff left the DfE in the 2023-24 financial year, up 18 per cent from 919 the year before, and 83 per cent higher than the 592 who left in 2018-19.

It means that around 13 per cent of DfE staff left in 2023-24, an increase in turnover from just 7 per cent in 2018-19. "Most" employees leave to join other departments, the DfE said.

But former civil servants warned of a loss of "organisational memory" and said "serving the government of the day" was now seen as more important than "speaking truth unto power".

Others blamed the government's back-to-the-office diktat, and union leaders pointed to stagnating pay.

One former official, who spoke anonymously, said the relationship between ministers and civil servants had "deteriorated dramatically", pointing to attacks from Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg when he was minister for government efficiency.

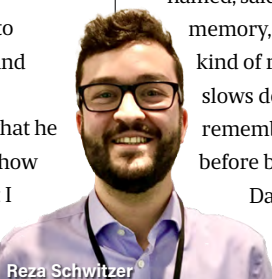
"Why would you work somewhere where the people who run your organisation are denigrating your profession, are publicly humiliating you? Would you go and work for Barclays if the CEO said in the press every day how shit his staff were? Probably not."

The findings come as political parties gear up for the general election. Based on current polls, a Labour victory looks likely.

Reza Schwitzer, who worked at the DfE between 2013 and 2021, said the "delivery challenges" facing an incoming Labour administration had been "underplayed", with "not enough attention" paid to how reforms would be implemented.

He said Bridget Phillipson was "right" to praise Michael Gove's "sense of energy and drive and determination".

He added: "Everyone involved knew what he was trying to deliver, but also, crucially, how we were to go about delivering it – what I would call the theory of change."



Reza Schwitzer



"The 'what' is important, but 'how' is potentially the real challenge given the state of the department and of the system."

Gareth Conyard, who worked at the department from 2003 to 2022, said he "loved being at the DfE", but it had "not felt like a happy place for a while before I left. 'Serving the government of the day' over-rode the importance of 'speaking truth unto power'".

Following the Brexit decision, he said that civil servants "became wary of saying things that were factually true but politically inconvenient for fear of being ignored".

Other departments also saw an increase in leavers. Between 2018-19 and 2023-24, the number leaving the Department for Work and Pensions rose 15 per cent, while the number of leavers from the Ministry of Justice increased by 54 per cent.

However, while both departments saw bigger increases in 2021-22 and 2022-23, leaver numbers dropped last year.

Some of the DfE's recent leavers were also the result of a "voluntary exit" scheme. Accounts show that this resulted in 384 exit packages in 2022-23.

Another former official, who asked not to be named, said there was "no organisational memory, so stuff is just perpetually being kind of repeated and rehashed, which slows down progress because no one remembers what had been done a year before because they weren't there".

David Thomas, who served as a policy adviser between 2021

and 2023, said the "challenges in our education system are deep and complex".

"We need people with experience and expertise steering the system so that we can make progress and not reinvent the wheel."

Officials said a key driver of some departures was the government's insistence that civil servants work at least three days a week in the office after the pandemic.

The "push to get officials back into the office to prove what felt like a political point" was "damaging", Conyard said.

He added: "It just felt bizarre, and that cannot help but have an impact on trust in decision making."

The FDA union, which represents senior civil servants, said 65 per cent of its DfE members had reported not seeing a "long-term future with the department".

Helen Kenny, the union's national officer for the DfE, warned that "with sub-inflation pay offers and an absence of pay progression, civil servants are left with no option but to move roles to seek higher pay".

She added: "Recruitment costs are significant to departments – the capacity lost by each vacant post and the time taken for each recruit to get up to speed impacts the department's ability to deliver for the public."

But data from DfE staff surveys shows that employees' "engagement index" – which rates experiences at work across nine themes – has actually increased from 63 per cent in 2018 to 65 per cent last year.

INVESTIGATION: FUNDING

Council decisions 'lack logic' as struggling schools miss out on 'hardship' cash

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

Up to 90 per cent of schools wrestling with deficits in areas splitting a £20 million "hardship fund" to help cover teacher pay rises have missed out on the extra cash.

A *Schools Week* investigation has also found that one local authority kept the entire government allocation to itself to cover its own deficit, depriving cash-strapped heads of the funding.

Meanwhile, leaders in other areas said decisions over which of the LA-maintained schools got the funding were made with "no logic". Some with surpluses were getting help ahead of those in the red.

The government set up the fund to help council-maintained schools "facing the greatest financial challenges" afford last year's 6.5 per cent teacher pay rise. But school business leader Hilary Goldsmith said the funding was "so low" that it could only at best "plug a hole in a sinking ship".

She added: "Doling out handouts to the poorest schools does nothing to help them overcome the fundamental issues they will be facing – regardless of the reasons for their deficits."

One-off grants 'do nothing' to help

The one-off government fund was "targeted" at local authorities with aggregated school-level deficits totalling more than 1 per cent of their schools' income.

Just 35 of the country's 153 councils were allocated a share of the cash. A further £20 million was used to top up the existing support offered to academies in financial difficulty.

Of the 16 councils who responded to our freedom of information request, 32 per cent of their schools in deficit last year missed out on any cash.

In Northumberland, documents show that the council had 23 maintained schools with total deficit balances of £2.7 million. The



£344,000 it received from the fund is less than 13 per cent of this.

Council chiefs opted to take "a targeted approach" by awarding the money only to those "in the most serious financial position". Twenty-one schools (91.3 per cent) lost out, as two schools – with combined deficits of £1.3 million – split funding.

A spokesperson said this approach "would have the most impact on our young people".

Just one of Sheffield's 10 deficit schools was awarded the council's full £518,000 allocation, after it was found to be the furthest away from balancing its books.

A separate £60,000 pot – contributed to by schools from their own budgets – was shared equally between six primaries.

Cllr Dawn Dale, the chair of Sheffield's education, children and families committee, said decisions on funding were made by its schools forum "as a whole, rather than being a [council] decision".

Meanwhile, 12 (39 per cent) of North Yorkshire's 31 deficit schools missed out on any of the £972,000 awarded to the authority.

A council spokesperson stressed that only those expected to remain in deficit over the next two years were

eligible for the payments of up to £100,000.

Government guidance states that officials expected "funding to be allocated on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the severity of the school's position and prioritising those in greatest need".

'No logic' to decisions

It added that not "every school with a deficit within that local authority should be given additional funding".

An application process was launched by Worcestershire to determine how the grant would be distributed. Council officials expected the funding would go towards "one-off revenue costs to achieve long-term... savings and sustainability".

Headteacher Bryn Thomas, who will receive a portion of the cash, called this "a fair and open process".

Elsewhere, however, leaders have criticised how the money was distributed. Minutes from a Hillingdon schools forum meeting in January show members noted that "there seemed no logic to the proposed allocation of funding" put forward by the council.

They argued that three primaries would have their "relatively small deficits... reduced to very small



Hilary Goldsmith

Continued on next page

INVESTIGATION: FUNDING

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amounts, while a secondary that was £2.4 million away from balancing its books would receive £186,000”.

This “would not have much of an impact”, they argued, with several members calling for the entire £491,000 sum allocated to the authority to be handed to the secondary.

The council argued that it had ensured “all of those in receipt of the funding were given an appropriate and effective allocation”.

On the Isle of Wight, headteachers were said to be “unhappy that the additional support had not been available for all schools who are struggling”. It seemed “unfair” to them that those “who are managing to balance their budget appear to be penalised for doing so”.

Money used on DSG deficit

The DfE also stressed seven months ago that “significant flexibility over how this funding can be used” would be given to local authorities.

Of those that responded to our FOI, Walsall was the only council to say it had not allocated its split of the hardship fund to any schools. Instead, all the cash was used to prop up its dedicated schools grant deficit in 2023-24, which it said was “in line with guidance”.

The cumulative deficit in 2022-23 was just over £500,000. This year’s figure has not yet been published.

Institute of School Business Leadership CEO Stephen Morales said: “There’s clearly a policy intention here for this money to go towards [councils’] structural deficits. But it’s then wrong [for the government] to say there’s an additional £20 million being injected into individual schools when that isn’t always the case.”

Lambeth also put £70,000 of its allocation towards “support and monitoring resources”, having assessed whether this “would also help work towards further reducing deficits”.

And in Enfield, £12,500 was used to provide schools with “specialist advice” on things like “contract reviews, budget monitoring, benchmarking”.

Schools in surplus on the Isle of Wight were awarded the cash while two in deficit missed out. But the council said these schools were forecasting deficits.

Dozens of deficit schools miss out on 'hardship' cash

Council	Allocation	Deficit schools given money	Deficit schools missing out	% of deficit schools missing out
Walsall	£309,601	0	5	100
Northumberland	£344,357	2	21	91
Sheffield	£517,960	1	9	90
South Tyneside	£605,845	8	6	43
Isle of Wight	£517,146	3	2	40
Somerset	£288,318	3	2	40
North Yorkshire	£972,188	19	12	39
Lambeth	£959,277	10	6	38
Reading	£218,585	9	3	25
Hillingdon	£491,623	5	1	17
Enfield	£965,742	16	2	11
Cumberland	£371,579	17	2	11
Greenwich	£554,688	18	1	5
Westmorland and Furness	£301,411	23	0	0
Wiltshire	£405,503	12	0	0
Windsor and Maidenhead	£222,130	5	0	0

Sources: FOI and council documents

Nerd note: Our analysis used school budget figures as of the end of 2022-23. These were obtained through FOI and found in schools forum papers

SCHOOLS WEEK

Southwark council refused our request for information as it feared disclosure could spark “distress and mayhem, possibly leading to children being pulled out of certain schools, making the whole situation even more difficult to manage”.

It argued that the “panic” would also spark an “excessively high number of enquiries from parents, and possibly also the press”, which would cause “considerable disruption” to schools’ day-to-day provision.

Meanwhile, figures show just how inadequate the cash has been. Despite receiving £288,000 through the fund, Somerset has seen 27 schools record an overall deficit for 2023-24, up from five the year before.

‘Billions away from funding we need’

Louise Gittins, chair of the Local Government Association’s children and young people board, said “many schools have been raising concerns about their financial stability”.

Morales estimated that “we are in the billions away from a package that will adequately avoid many schools and trusts from falling off a cliff ... £20 million will do absolutely diddly squat”.

Goldsmith said that “support needs to come from [local authorities] to help schools before they get into difficulties”.

“But sadly, many LAs now lack the funding to operate effective financial support services for schools who are starting to head towards difficulties.

“So, rather than band aid funding, we really need to see some firm commitment from government to invest the funding that schools need just to break even.”

A DfE spokesperson said mainstream schools and high needs funding “was over £3.9 billion higher in 2023-24 compared to the previous year, taking school funding to £57.7 billion”.

The department gave councils “flexibility on how to allocate the funding to help their schools move towards a sustainable long-term position”.

The spokesperson added: “We are continuing to take action to help those authorities with deficits. Many local authorities have a surplus on their Dedicated Schools Grants accounts, and we have published guidance on good practice, drawing on the work of these financially successful authorities.”



Stephen Morales

NEWS: EDTECH

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
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Ministers seek edtech evidence checkers

LUCAS CUMISKEY

@LUCAS_CUMISKEY

EXCLUSIVE

Ministers plan to appoint edtech evidence checkers to help schools work out which products deliver the best impact as part of an artificial intelligence “training package” for teachers worth up to £5 million.

This will also include a proposed “online resource that covers essential training for all teachers” and a tool kit to support leaders rolling out and “embedding effective” AI practice.

The government is seeking a provider to run the scheme and “help education professionals take advantage of AI’s potential”, a tender document states.

A consultation on AI last year showed “the number one request from educators is further training and guidance on its safe use”.

The Department for Education said the plans were in the “early stage of development”. It is currently “judging interest from potential suppliers” for the multi-year project, worth between £1 million and £5 million.

But Rose Luckin, a professor of learner-centred design at University College London, said the plans were a “critical and welcome step forward”.

“She added: “As AI becomes more prevalent in education, it is crucial that teachers have the knowledge and skills to leverage it effectively, confidently and responsibly.”

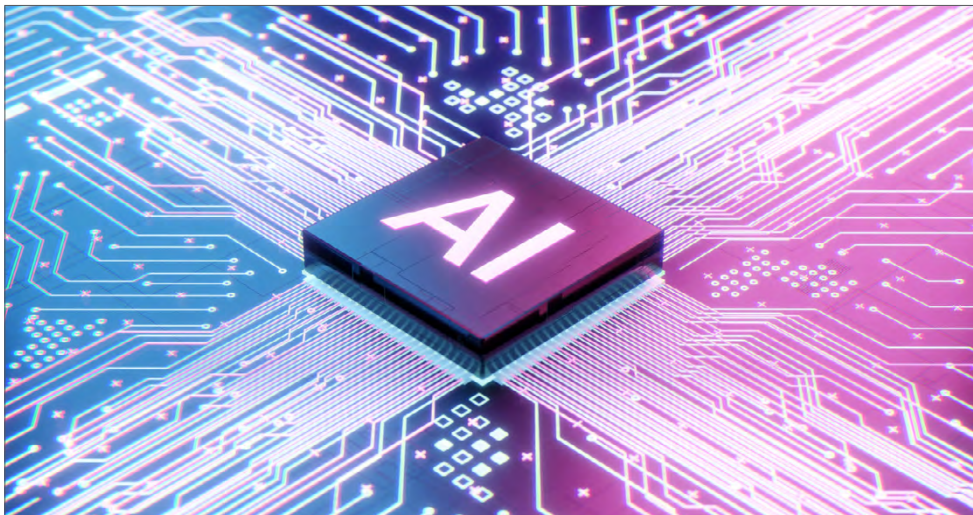
Edtech evidence claims scrutinised

The DfE tender document outlines plans for a “project team to facilitate the running of an edtech evidence board of experts”, who will “quality assure evidence of edtech product efficacy against set criteria”.

The plan would help schools and colleges to know which products are “grounded in evidence”.

Education secretary Gillian Keegan has previously called on edtech firms to be “transparent” with schools about the evidence behind their products, adding: “We should have the same expectations for robust evidence in edtech as we do elsewhere in education.”

Under the plans, edtech firms would be asked to “submit evidence of product efficacy”, which



“area-specific committees would [then] assess”.

“Their decisions would be scrutinised and ratified by an overarching board, before being published,” the DfE added.

The project team, board and committees would create the criteria against which to assess the evidence.

AI help on the way

Meanwhile, the training offer would probably include a website and “the opportunity for trainees to start ‘having a go’ at prompting a simple AI system”.

Five to 10 grants would be awarded to teachers or organisations to “develop case studies on effective practice in successfully implementing widely available AI tools in schools and colleges”.

And extra training would be offered to support teachers in “developing more advanced skills through a series of live webinars covering different techniques for the use of AI”.

Ministers are keen for schools to take advantage of the AI revolution by using it for purposes such as streamlining administrative tasks, while being alive to the risks. But the DfE’s policy paper on generative AI in education says content created can be inaccurate, inappropriate, biased, out of date or unreliable.

Edtech investor Richard Taylor, who is managing director of MediaTaylor, said that if a school was “really interested” it could do “half the stuff” being proposed already, such as by Googling how to do a prompt for AI tools such as ChatGPT.

“You’ve got to work out how

you’re going to do it in a way that doesn’t add more pressure on teachers or on the very scarce amount of professional development time they’ve got,” he added.

He questioned how the project would “get beyond the enthusiastic...early adopters” of AI and cut through to the “meaty middle” of the teacher workforce.

Two in five teachers have never used AI

A Teacher Tapp survey last month found that 20 per cent of respondents reported they had used AI in the previous week to help with school work, while 14 per cent had used it that month. But 40 per cent said they had never used it.

A YouGov poll of 1,012 teachers in the UK in November found almost two-thirds thought AI was too unreliable to assess students’ work or help with resource or lesson planning.

Jodie Lopez, an edtech business consultant, said training teachers on AI use in education was “definitely welcomed and needed”.

But she added: “There is also a lack of CPD more widely in technology use in education too and for some educators a sudden leap to AI is premature.”

Some schools still “struggled to get decent wi-fi”, she added.

Taylor suggested that the DfE would be better off running “a consultation process first to work out what schools and teachers want, what do they know and what are people doing elsewhere”.

The DfE declined to comment.



Rose Luckin

INVESTIGATION: ATTENDANCE

Butlin's accused of 'undermining' school absence fight

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOTH

EXCLUSIVE

Butlin's has been accused of "undermining" schools' work to boost attendance by advertising "term-time breaks" as "great-value getaways" for families with a "hard-to-please teen on your hands".

The holiday firm offers four-night "showtime term-time midweek breaks" from just £13 per person, much cheaper than rates during school holidays.

While some activities are aimed at pre-school youngsters – such as one featuring cartoon character Peppa Pig – others featuring Optimus Prime, a robot from Transformers, seem to be targeted at older children.

Posing as a parent, we asked the firm if the holidays were suitable for school-aged children. A customer care representative said that "all breaks are suitable for all ages".

'Undermines schools'

Ministers are pushing hard for schools to improve their attendance rates, which are much lower than before Covid. Persistent absence rates are nearly double those in 2019.

David Whitehead, chief executive of Our Community Multi Academy Trust in Kent, said schools were working hard to "combat non-attendance for all pupils – which takes time, resources and staffing capacity."

"They continue to work hard to make school 'the place to be' and encourage parents to take responsibility in getting their children in to learn, spend time with their friends and be part of the community."

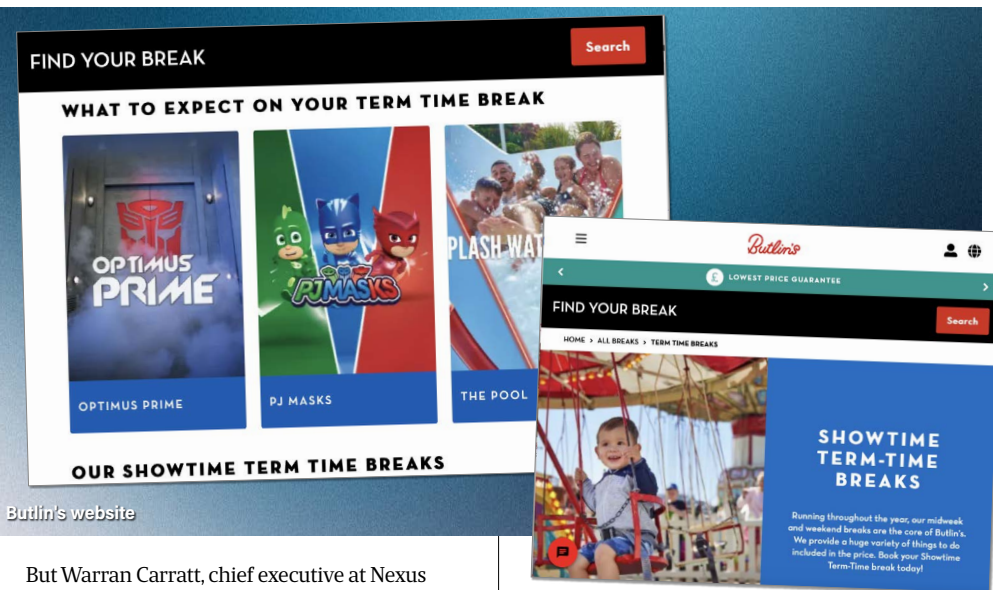
"However, companies actively encouraging term-time breaks completely undermine this messaging and effort, and in turn can create more hostility and the breaking down of the home-school agreement on the ground."

Butlin's website advertises term-time breaks, stating: "Whether you've got an always-on-the-go tot or a hard-to-please teen on your hands (or both!), these great-value getaways are just the ticket when it comes to family fun."

The page does cover weekend breaks as well as midweek stays. Some parts of England also have two-week half terms, meaning the breaks could fall in holidays.



Warran Carratt



Butlin's website

But Warran Carratt, chief executive at Nexus MAT and adviser on the DfE's attendance action alliance, said the "marketing of targeted holiday offers specific to term-time doesn't ring of civic-mindedness, and risks creating a greater distance between families and education."

"There are many signatories to the social contract, and those operating in the private sector shouldn't be exempt from that duty. Offering to alleviate the pressure on family finances in this way – at the cost of a child's education – feels inescapably exploitative."

According to the Butlin's website, a "silver room" in Skegness starts from £69 for a four-night break in June. The same room during May half-term costs more than £299.

Parents can seek permission for an authorised holiday in term-time if there are "exceptional circumstances". Authorised holiday rates have stayed at 0.1 per cent for years but unauthorised absence rates rose from 0.4 to 0.5 per cent in 2022-23.

Fines of £60, or £120 if not paid within 21 days, can be issued for term-time holidays taken without permission. But saving on a term-time holiday often eclipses that cost.

Comments in a Butlin's Skegness Facebook group include one parent saying they have been "naughty" by taking their child out of school for a holiday, or telling others to "chance the fine".

Carratt said it would be "far more responsible for holiday companies and resorts to consider lowering their prices in the school holidays".

Whitehead suggested he would like someone to "hold these companies to account".

A Butlin's spokesperson said: "We

specifically call out term-time to avoid any confusion."

The company aims to "help families enjoy a holiday at incredible value regardless of the Butlin's break".

But they added: "We're always reviewing and updating our marketing material, so will take any feedback on-board for future content."

Meanwhile, the main picture on Center Parcs's "midweek breaks" page was of an adult and toddler, but the page also had pictures of what looked like school-aged children enjoying activities.

A spokesperson said they "absolutely do not encourage families to take their children out of school to visit us". They have since replaced images of school-aged children.

A four-night stay at its Sherwood Forest "executive lodge" for two adults and one child costs £649 in mid-June. The same stay costs £1,399 during May-half term.

Breaks are "priced according to demand", the spokesperson added.

Parkdean Resorts' midweek breaks webpage invites you to "take your toddlers" on breaks for "couples or families looking to save money". Its marketing video appears to show school-aged children but a spokesperson said it does not encourage families to take children out of school.

Haven's "midweek breaks" are advertised for "young families" with "tot-friendly activities".

A Department for Education spokesperson said there are 175 days a year when pupils are not expected to be in school: "Holidays should be around school breaks to avoid taking children out of school during term-time."

NEWS

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Campaigners criticise Keegan's Catholic 'conflict'

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE

The education secretary faces "serious conflict of interest questions", a campaign organisation said, over a donation from the Catholic church while its leaders were lobbying to abolish the free school faith admissions cap.

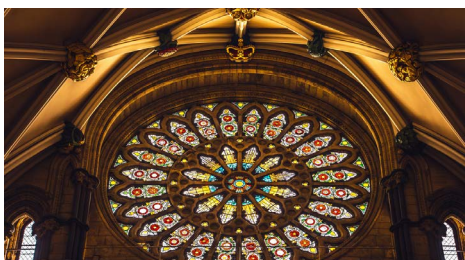
Parliamentary records show Keegan declared an "in-kind" donation with a value of £17,710.60 from the Catholic Bishops Conference England and Wales.

This was for an intern in her parliamentary office for ten months from October 2022 to July last year, records show.

The donation included an educational allowance of £7,000 paid directly to the intern, plus accommodation valued at £10,710.60.

The internship was organised through the Faith in Politics initiative.

Its website describes it as a "year-long internship scheme that uniquely offers a foundation of Catholic faith and spiritual formation for those who believe they may have a vocation to public



service in politics or public affairs".

Over the same period, the Catholic church was lobbying for the removal of the 50 per cent cap of faith-based admissions for free schools, stepping up its campaign last June.

The cap, introduced in 2010, has particularly hindered plans to open Catholic free schools because canon law prevents them from turning away pupils on the basis of their Catholic faith.

Earlier this month, the government announced it would scrap the cap and remove a block on new faith special schools.

Stephen Evans, chief executive of the National Secular Society, said the donation raises "serious conflict of interest questions.

"Democracy demands fair and unbiased

governance. We can't have ministers taking financial contributions from the Catholic Church and then advancing a policy that serves their agenda."

But a source close to Keegan said it was "totally wrong" to suggest there was a conflict of interest around the appointment and there was "no lobbying" as part of the internship.

They said the intern was interviewed and appointed before Keegan became education secretary, and the placement ended last July, 10 months before the announcement was made.

They added that Keegan's office had hired interns since 2018 and used schemes that provided funding as she would not hire unpaid staff.

"Gillian has always been about spreading opportunity around and does that in her own office."

A Catholic Education Service spokesperson said the Bishops' Conference "has run an internship scheme for nearly 20 years" and placed interns in the offices of "Catholic MPs from all parties".

"This is part of the church's mission to encourage Catholics to follow a vocation to serve in public life and the interns work for the MP, not the church, with nothing required or expected in return."

LUCAS CUMISKEY | @LUCAS_CUMISKEY

Building surveys planned to head off future safety crisis

Ministers hope to avert the next school buildings scandal by commissioning research to uncover the "future safety risks" of the sector's crumbling estate.

The Department for Education hopes the investigation will boost its understanding of "condition issues" in school buildings, in particular those built between 1945 and 1990.

The research is expected to include intrusive structural surveys and the DfE hopes it will yield policy recommendations on "mitigating future risks".

A government tender document said the plans are in the "early stages of development" and that it is "judging interest from potential suppliers".

If it gets the go ahead, AI modelling could also be used to spot "specific types of defects experienced in older buildings" in a bid to "predict the likely nature of building deterioration".

Modelling could also be done to "map the prevalence of future structural risks and condition issues" across school buildings

constructed between 1945 and 1990.

It comes after *Schools Week* revealed last year that promises by ministers to inspect hundreds of post-war school buildings that are ranked alongside RAAC as a top safety concern had not been met.

The DfE lists school building safety as one of six key risks in its latest annual report. Its "greatest concern" are buildings constructed post-1945 using materials or designs that are "past their intended design life and could be subject to defects".

Academy funding consultant Tim Warneford said the research could "strengthen the hand of the DfE when presenting a far more accurate picture of the condition and costs relating to the extent of investment that the Treasury have hitherto failed to adequately invest in".

More than 100 schools were told to shut buildings immediately that contained reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) in August 2023, just days before the new academic year, causing mass disruption for pupils.

In March this year, the Public Accounts Committee warned that school buildings were now one of the "big nasties" – the big spending problems that a future government must solve because of the "lack of forward thinking" of the current government.

It claimed that the DfE had "failed to consider long-term value for money in school maintenance decisions. Problems with RAAC and asbestos have shown that, without a long-term plan, there is a huge impact when a problem crystallises."

Pepe Di'lasio, general secretary of the ASCL school leaders' union, said the research felt rather like "shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted".

A June 2023 National Audit Office report found there were 700,000 pupils being taught in buildings that needed major repair work, with a £2 billion capital funding shortfall.

A DfE spokesperson said: "We are the first government in history to survey the whole of the school estate – ensuring the safety of our pupils and staff."

NEWS: FALLING ROLLS

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DfE in court over falling rolls academy plan

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

The government is fighting a High Court challenge over its decision to academise a school which the local council planned to close amid falling rolls – highlighting tensions over such decisions.

Pooles Park school, in north London, was given an academy order in February last year after an 'inadequate' rating. Two months later, Islington council launched a consultation to close the primary, saying it was "the most acutely impacted by falling rolls" in Hornsey, the area in which it is based.

However, the Department for Education (DfE) refused Islington's pleas to revoke the order, leading to the judicial review.

'Council and DfE conflicts'

Former national schools commissioner Sir David Carter said it was a "good example of the conflict that can exist between local governance and the role of the DfE in the academy sector".

Shortly after the council officially approved the school's closure, the DfE approved plans for the school to join the Bridge Multi-Academy Trust.

In papers lodged by Alan Bates KC, representing education secretary Gillian Keegan, he noted that the council's case for revocation was "Pooles Park was 'the worst'...in the borough, and that it was 'unviable' by reason" of falling rolls.

While keeping it open "would not make as great a contribution to reducing" primary places, Bridge's proposals "would nevertheless contribute towards meeting that reasonable objective of the council", he said.

The MAT wants to run the primary on a "shared resource model" with another academy. The schools would share a senior leadership team and other resources, and both would reduce their intakes.

"The decision taken on behalf of the secretary of state was thus the product of a careful policy judgment," Bates added.

"The Bridge MAT's proposal represented a highly attractive opportunity to meet needs of children with complex SEN which are currently not being adequately met in the north London area."

'Wide margin on such policy judgments'

The government said it was "simply wrong" for Islington to suggest that the school's



'inadequate' Ofsted meant it was "unviable and cannot be saved".

It was "unfortunate" the council had not provided it with "effective support... to prevent its quality of education from slipping", but "better leadership and management" was "likely to produce improvement".

The DfE also contended that there was "no basis for any assertion that the council has been rendered unable to carry out its statutory duty" to secure "efficient primary education".

Its role "does not require that it be placed in control of all local schools so that it can, according to its own wishes, select any local school for closure".

"There is no realistic basis for the court to intervene on the basis that the decision was irrational, or the product of legally insufficient inquiry, as the council contends.

"This is a context in which the secretary of state should be afforded a wide margin to make policy judgments."

National birth-rate slumps are expected to cause primary pupil numbers in England to tumble by 16.6 per cent by 2032. London is one of the worst-hit parts of the country, with the

number of babies born having already dropped 17 per cent between 2012 and 2021.

This is equivalent to 23,225 fewer children. Almost 15 per cent of school places in the city are now unfilled.

Clarity needed from new government

Islington said its ability to "strategically manage and reconfigure" the primary and secondary estate has been "compromised".

It pointed to laws preventing it from closing academies and the automatic triggering of the academisation process by 'inadequate' judgments.

Association of School and College Leaders general secretary Pepe Di'lasio said "schools, parents and children need all those in authority to be pulling in the same direction... Very difficult decisions will have to be increasingly made because of falling rolls.

"This case appears to reflect a worrying disconnect between local authority and government decisions over the future of a school," Di'lasio added.

The full judicial review hearing took place this month. The judge reserved his decision for a later date.

Carter said a new government would "need to bring clarity to issues like admissions and place-planning in order for the roles of the different actors in the education sector to become much clearer in the future".



Pepe Di'lasio

NEWS IN BRIEF

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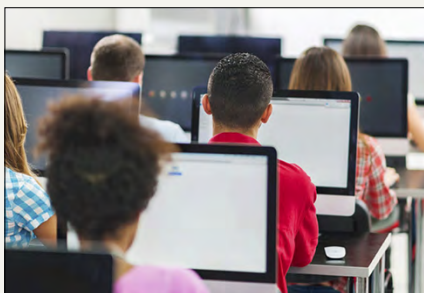
Computer science GCSE changes

GCSE computer science students will learn about the impacts that artificial intelligence can have on “individuals, wider society, the economy and the environment” under proposed content revisions.

The government is consulting on updated content for the qualification. Guidance was last updated in 2015 and “since that time digital technology has moved on, meaning that some content is outdated”, the DfE said.

The proposed content will state that students should study the “broader impacts that digital technology (including artificial intelligence) can have on individuals, wider society, the economy and the environment, including issues of ethics, legality, bias”.

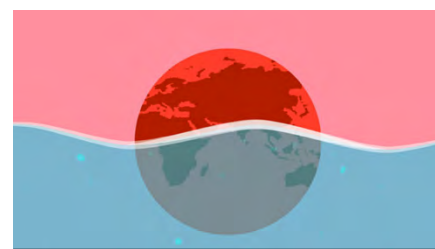
The current content states that students should learn “the ethical, legal and environmental impacts of digital technology on wider society, including issues of privacy and cyber security”, but does not mention AI



specifically.

“By updating the subject content, we are ensuring that the GCSE is maintained to a high standard and will continue to support students in progressing to further study, training or employment,” the DfE said.

The consultation closes in July. A revised draft of subject content should be published in early 2025, with first teaching from the academic year 2026-27.

[Full story here](#)


Climate volunteers call

Education secretary Gillian Keegan has called for 1,000 expert volunteers to help schools create climate action plans.

The climate ambassador scheme provides schools with a local expert to turn their climate and sustainability “ambitions into action”, a press release said.

The scheme was launched in 2022 by the University of Reading and STEM Learning, with support from the government’s UK Research and Innovation agency.

In December, it was expanded to help all education settings draw up climate action plans by 2025.

Nine regional hubs, mostly run by universities, have been set up so that the experts can be matched with education settings.

The ambassadors should have skills and knowledge related to decarbonisation, adaptation and resilience, nature and biodiversity and climate education and green skills. Training and development will be provided.

Ambassadors will be matched with schools based on their interests, expertise and background. They can help with tasks including creating the action plan, identifying ways to decarbonise operations and increasing biodiversity.

Next month, the DfE is also rolling out a “sustainability support for education online hub”.

[Full story here](#)

Inflation-busting exam fees rise

The prices of GCSE and A-level exams have soared by an inflation-busting 6.4 per cent this year.

As of February, the average GCSE cost £51.15, up 6.6 per cent, an Ofqual report stated.

The average A-level cost £121.39, 5.8 per cent more than last year, and the average price of an AS-level is up 6.8 per cent to £69.47.

Inflation over the same period was 3.8 per cent. But Ofqual said below-inflation rises last year meant prices rose “broadly in-line with or

below inflation” over a two-year period.

Schools spend hundreds of millions of pounds on exam fees every year, and recent fee rises have proved controversial as leaders grapple with budget pressures.

Ofqual said its findings suggest that “qualifications likely represent similar value for money to two years ago”.


[Full story here](#)

Focus more on happy teachers, says report

There must be a greater “focus” on helping teachers to have “happy and healthy lives”, a former trust boss has warned after research found a “stark gap” in wellbeing.

A survey by Edurio of more than 11,000 school staff found teachers were more than twice as likely to report that they felt unwell physically and mentally than leaders, and were more likely to report being overworked,

stressed and lacking sleep.

John Murphy, the former chief executive of Oasis Community Learning, said the “pressures of the accountability system are undoubtedly part of the picture, along with the aftermath of Covid, which has left a trail of ill-health as well as anxiety about health”.

Jonny Uttley, CEO of the Education Alliance multi-academy trust in East Yorkshire, added

that the findings “painted a difficult picture about staff working in schools and their lived experience” and “shows the scale of challenge” faced by the sector.

Just a fifth of disabled staff reported feeling very or quite well, compared with 43 per cent of non-disabled staff.

[Full story here](#)

NEWS

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Quango boss will decide if Oak is ‘relevant and effective’

FREDDIE WHITTAKER
@FCDWHITTAKER

The boss of the Department for Education’s property arm will conduct an “independent” review of the Oak National Academy to check that the online school “remains relevant” and is “performing efficiently”.

Lara Newman, chief executive of LocatED, has been tasked by the government with reviewing the quango’s “efficacy, governance, accountability and efficiency”.

In practice, this will mean checking whether Oak “remains relevant”, is “performing effectively” and that there is an “appropriate relationship” between it and ministers which allows “day-to-day operational independence”.

She will also look at if the quango can “improve

productivity” and what users’ experiences are.

Set up during the pandemic by a group of volunteers, Oak was turned into an arms-length public body in September 2022 with £43 million in government funding. It later got another £2 million to expand its AI offer.

At the time, the DfE committed to review the organisation within two years.

Newman will be responsible for “ensuring a proportionate, rigorous and fair review that offers recommendations to facilitate continuous improvement”.

The review will look at issues including:

The assessment will be “completed by September 2024”. Ministers will “determine the final timing and manner of publication of the review”.

The terms of reference do not set



Lara Newman

out how Newman was appointed but state that the schools minister will get initial findings by July and “provide their view on the direction of the review”.

However the election will now impact this – meaning it will be up to the new government to decide whether to continue.

If a full report is published, the minister can decide whether to accept or reject any recommendations made.

Newman will be supported by civil servants from the department.

The review team will be “encouraged to identify” stakeholders from whom to collect evidence, however they will be “identified in consultation with Oak” and its sponsorship team in the department.

LocatED is also a government quango set up in 2016 to secure sites for free schools.

SAMANTHA BOOTH | @SAMANTHAJBBOOTH

Most teachers say they don’t get enough high-quality training

There are gaps in the “golden thread” and considerable numbers of teachers are “underwhelmed” by development opportunities, Ofsted has said.

Fewer than half of teachers surveyed also felt their training was “high quality, relevant or sufficient”, a report on professional development published by the watchdog on Friday found.

An earlier study found mounting workloads were “getting in the way” of the government’s flagship training and development reforms.

The early career framework (ECF) was introduced in 2019 and new national professional qualifications (NPQs) in 2021.

Here are the key findings...

1. Underwhelmed teachers

Twelve months ago, Ofsted reported that only 40 per cent of teachers and leaders were “satisfied with their training offer”.

This time, the proportion who felt the training they received over the past year “was high quality, relevant or sufficient” was still less than half.

“It remains concerning that a considerable proportion of teachers were underwhelmed by their recent training and development opportunities,” the report said.

2. Workload barriers

Eighty-seven per cent of teachers cited workload pressures as a factor preventing them from taking part in professional development. This was up from 85 per cent last year.

“Other research suggests that teachers frequently work significantly more than their contracted hours,” the report stated. “This can make it extremely challenging for them to find adequate time to undertake professional development.”

3. Focus on ‘crisis management’

These barriers meant leaders “were not always able to invest in and develop longer-term strategic programmes of professional development”.

Around half of schools “focused on arranging short-term and ad-hoc crisis management” training in response to emerging issues, such as safeguarding and pupil wellbeing.

But the programmes were often “poorly designed”, had “limited long-term benefits” and heightened workload pressures.

4. Gaps in golden thread

Access to high-quality and relevant professional development “varied according to a teacher’s

role, contract type and length of tenure in the profession”.

ECTs, those studying for an NPQ and leaders suggested their opportunities were “high quality”. But part-timers and experienced teachers not in a top job “were less likely to say that they had received a satisfactory” development offer.

5. Special schools face greater challenge

Researchers visited five special schools and found “unique challenges”, one of which was staff having to “take multiple training courses, often around safeguarding or medical aspects, to ensure they can fulfil their duty of care”.

This was cited as a “constraining factor” by teachers and leaders who had to attend sessions during evenings, weekends and holidays.

6. Best schools ‘more innovative’

Ofsted noted that the “most effective” settings used “innovative” methods of providing teacher development by investing in “long-term strategic planning”.

Some multi-academy trusts also helped to mitigate barriers, with schools drawing on additional resources from the MAT, such as supply cover, to improve access to training.

IN PARLIAMENT

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Music hub reforms 'torrid', leaders tell MPs

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Government reforms to music hubs have sent organisations scrambling to exit the teachers' pension scheme, left some provision at "enormous risk" and put staff through the "most torrid times of their career", MPs were told.

Music hub leaders and experts gave evidence to the Parliamentary education committee on Tuesday following the government's decision to slash the number of hubs from 116 to 43.

This would provide economies of scale and more opportunities for training and development, the government said.

Music hubs were set up in 2012 to take over the music education provision previously run by local authorities. Here is what we learned...

1. Arts Council 'bit off more than they could chew'

John de la Cour, chair of Severn Arts which runs a hub, warned the implementation of the programme was "acting against its own ambition because it takes too long".

He felt staff at the Arts Council, which administers the scheme and ran the tender process, were "biting off more than they could chew".

"The whole thing was being thrown up in the air, and you don't do that if you aren't extremely clear about what benefit you think you want to get from this. And that has never been clear."

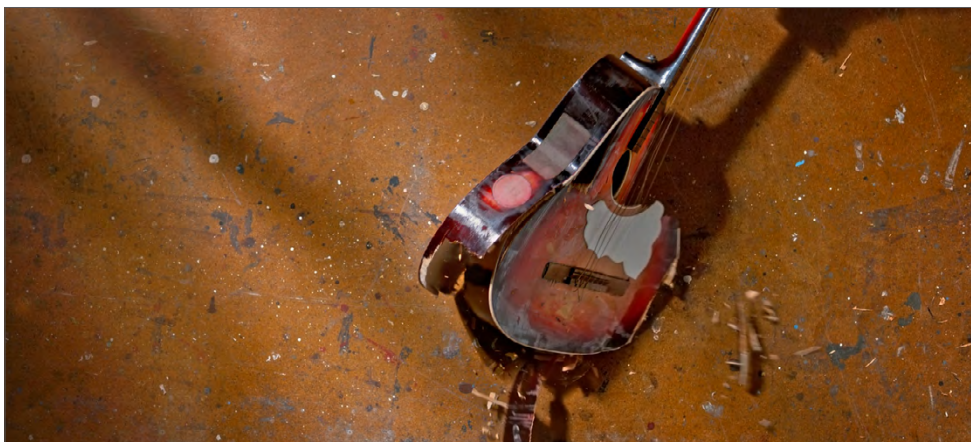
The government's plan had "very wide ambitions but a funding programme behind it which is completely unable to meet those expectations".

Staff up and down the country "have worked enormous hours meeting ridiculous deadlines, having to plough through enormous amounts of paperwork".

"Many experienced managers have told me that the last 18 months have been the most torrid times of their entire arts career."

2. Hubs scramble to leave pension scheme

Hubs directly employ musical instrument teachers. Teaching staff in hubs that are run by councils must be in the teachers' pension scheme by law, but many staff in hubs run by charities are also in the TPS.



Employer contributions rose by more than 20 per cent last month, from 23.6 to 28.6 per cent, and the DfE has been providing top-up funding towards the rise.

Music hubs run by councils will continue to receive the funding from September, but those run by charities and other organisations will lose it.

The decision will have "enormous human and financial consequences", said de la Cour.

Severn is now consulting on whether to leave the teachers' pension scheme to protect the company from an estimated "£300,000 hit".

Schools minister Damian Hinds said the DfE was "going to be doing some work to understand [the impact] more fully", but added: "You should not infer from that that we're necessarily going to do something different."

Chris Walters, from the Musician's Union, said that up to four hubs were "well on the way to finishing their consultations" to exit the scheme. Around 1,100 teachers are understood to be affected.

3. Snubbed provision 'at enormous risk'

The deadline for bids to lead new hubs was last September, but the winners were only announced this month. It leaves unsuccessful hubs scrambling to form partnerships to deliver provision in just five months.

Andrew Lane, managing director of Dynamics Medway, which lost out to Kent Music, said music hub activity in his area was now at "enormous risk".

He called for a "national pause", or at least a one-year postponement of transition in areas where there had

been contested bids. He said that six areas faced "similar challenges" to Medway.

Jenny Oldroyd, the DfE's director for curriculum and qualifications, said partnerships would "take time. I wouldn't at all expect us to be in a place of formed partnerships and clarity for the future two weeks into this five-month process."

4. Real-term cuts and capital shortage

The scheme's £79 million government funding is almost exactly the same as when the hubs launched in 2012 – with hubs having to reduce staff amid real-terms cuts.

The government is providing £25 million in capital cash for instruments and equipment, but funding rules mean it can't be spent on maintenance and repair.

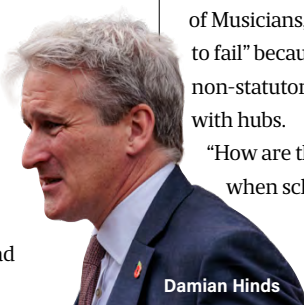
Michael Summers, from Durham Music Service, said they could also only buy secondhand equipment from providers listed via a portal, preventing him from buying cheap instruments on eBay or Facebook Marketplace.

5. Hub 'performance' measures mulled

Hinds said the government was looking at developing performance measures for hubs. They could look at the amount of teaching time for music or how many children enter certain qualifications.

But Stuart Darke, from the Incorporated Society of Musicians, said some hubs were being "set up to fail" because the government's music plan is non-statutory and schools do not have to engage with hubs.

"How are they going to increase engagement when schools don't have to?" he asked.



Damian Hinds

Teachers need guidance and freedom of expression, blasphemy report concludes

LUCAS CUMISKEY
@LUCAS_CUMISKEY

Ministers should issue statutory guidance on managing blasphemy-related incidents in schools and other forms of harassment and intimidation, a government-commissioned review has urged.

Lord Walney's report, published on Tuesday, said the guidance should include "commitments to upholding teachers' freedom of expression". Those involved in incidents should not be automatically suspended or have their identities exposed, it added.

It should make clear that "schools are not required to engage with local community groups or religious institutions in managing blasphemy-related incidents or other tensions".

The wide-ranging report urges the government to "put liberal first principles... at the heart of how it confronts extreme protest".

It comes after the review by Dame Sara Khan into social cohesion condemned "intimidatory protests outside schools" and called for buffer zones to stop them. Walney concluded that there was "evidence of aggressive protests targeting

schools".

He detailed how opposition to a lesson from the No Outsiders programme, designed to teach pupils about groups protected under the Equalities Act 2010, sparked "abusive and intimidating protests" outside schools in Birmingham in 2019.

"Not only were the anti-LGBT protests intimidatory and, at times, homophobic, but they should also be seen as a continuation of long-standing agitation by local Islamists," Walney said.

Seven primary schools suspended the lessons before a High Court judge ruled in favour of keeping an exclusion zone banning such rallies outside Anderton Park school in Sparkhill, Birmingham.

Walney flagged two "stand-out" incidents of anti-blasphemy rallies at secondary schools.

One saw protests outside Batley Grammar School, in Kirklees, West Yorkshire, in March 2021 after a religious studies teacher showed pupils a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad during a lesson. He was driven into hiding in fear for his life.

Batley Multi Academy Trust suspended the teacher and apologised, but an independent

inquiry cleared him of wrongdoing.

Kettlethorpe High School in Wakefield, West Yorkshire, "faced angry allegations online that a copy of the Quran had been damaged on school premises" in February 2023.


The report states that the "boy in question, who has high-functioning autism, received multiple death threats" amid inaccurate claims that the book was burnt or destroyed.

Walney said the "so-called blasphemy rows ... and the implicit threat of violence associated with such allegations exercised a form of veto over what is taught in British classrooms and inappropriately involved religious institutions in internal school issues".

Home Secretary James Cleverly has said he will "carefully consider" the recommendations.

In March, the Khan review called on the government to publish figures on the scale of harassment experienced by schools and teachers. It said it should legislate for a 150-metre buffer zone to prevent protests outside schools and establish a cohesion and conflict unit to support schools.

The government is due to publish its response before the summer break.



Lord Walney

SAMANTHA BOOTH | @SAMANTHAJBOTH

Expand financial education and make it compulsory, MPs say

Ministers should "urgently" review the maths curriculum to expand financial education and make it compulsory in RSHE lessons, MPs have said.

The national curriculum was beefed up in 2014 to include more elements of financial literacy, particularly in maths.

But the education select committee said schools found it hard to prioritise financial education beyond basic concepts and many teachers "lack confidence" in delivering its content.

Committee chair Robin Walker said: "A decade since it was introduced with broad support, financial education in England needs an urgent update that takes account of how the schools sector, financial pressures on children and consumer habits have changed.

"There is cross-party support for delivering financial education in schools, but it has not yet reached its full potential."

Here are the key recommendations...

1. The government should "urgently" review the key stage 1 to 4 maths curriculum to expand "the provision and relevance" of financial education. This could be through a "model curriculum" approach, rather than "re-drawing" the national curriculum.

2. Make the economic and financial elements of RHSE education statutory. It is a "simple and effective way of expanding financial education at both levels and signalling the increased importance of the subject to all students".

3. Every school or multi-academy trust should consider having a "financial education lead". They could be a maths, RSHE or citizenship teacher and coordinate financial education across the curriculum.

4. The DfE should curate and promote a selection of high-quality financial education teaching materials which are easily accessible to teachers and pupils.

5. Financial education training should be available to all trainee teachers. This should be continued through professional development and subject knowledge enhancement courses in financial education.

6. DfE should work with Ofsted to "review how it can improve its evaluation of financial education".

7. Ministers should participate in the financial education element of the OECD's international PISA assessments of education performance. Currently, England and the other UK nations opt out.



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Profile

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'Everyone has room for several careers in their lifetime'

From film-maker to tech entrepreneur to head teacher to teen novel writer, Alex Prior has followed an unlikely path, Jessica Hill writes

Alex Prior well knows how painful it can be as a headteacher to pour your energy into a school, only for it to be heavily (and to him unfairly) criticised by Ofsted.

It happened to him twice, partly because he “never shied away from taking on difficult schools to which more sensible people would have given a wide berth”.

It is telling that his proudest career moment – leading the transformation of a middle school into a secondary – is also one that “half-killed” him.

Now, he has shunned headship for a less stressful life writing teen sci-fi novels. But he keeps his hand in by training up the next generation of

teachers as associate leader of a teaching school, and he is much happier as a result.

Being too ambitious

Before all that, Prior had an eclectic career filming the Madchester music scene and running one of the UK's first online media companies. Education was not part of his “game plan”, but he got recruited straight into school leadership.

It is why he only got his qualified teacher status (QTS) almost a decade into his education career, just before taking on his first headship in 2014.

At Etonbury Academy, part of the Bedfordshire Schools Trust, he led a near £30 million

building programme to transform the small, “underperforming” middle school into an extended secondary. The school's capacity was increased from 400 to 1,100 pupils in four years.

He admits in retrospect that the project was “too ambitious” for a new head to take on.

His pride in it comes from the fact that, on his watch, the school became oversubscribed for the first time – testament to the support he received from the local community. And results improved.

But the many challenges he faced were “exhausting” and “half-killed” him.

Etonbury was “capital rich, but revenue poor” with growth funding being “nowhere near enough

Profile: Alex prior

to cover the very rapid growth”.

Prior learnt “more about sewage and drainage than I ever wanted to, through endless meetings with builders and contractors”.

The middle school had “very few” teachers with any experience beyond key stage 3, which meant recruiting at least a dozen teachers each year with “essentially no recruitment budget”.

Some teachers quit, deciding that the “scale of change” in such a short time was “too much”.

Prior also had to persuade local people to believe in the new school, which meant “a lot of PR out in the community”. All this meant less time for education.

“Rather unhelpfully” in the midst of this turmoil, in 2017 Ofsted visited and grilled leaders on whether their newly-designed curriculum had been embedded. There had not been time yet for that.

They rated the school ‘requires improvement’ (the middle school had been ‘good’). It caused Prior to conclude that the education system “doesn’t support leaders prepared to take on the really difficult schools” which are “professionally risky”.

Madchester life

Prior’s ability to embrace new career paths perhaps evolved from a transient childhood in which he attended eight different schools, due to “family disruption”. His mum, a former journalist, and dad, a property developer, had a “fractious” relationship.

He was identified as being exceptionally bright at primary school and was signed up to a long-term childhood intelligence research programme in London’s Harley Street.

The constant upheaval was “not conducive to a great attitude to learning”, although it meant he excelled at “getting to know people quickly”.

Later, as a school leader, he developed an affinity for children regularly moved between schools, who would arrive “quiet and withdrawn” and be moved again just as they were starting to feel “settled and secure... Your heart would break for them every time.”

Prior developed a passion for film-making and studied communication and media studies



‘I wasn’t prepared to see decent people being put through this process’

at Manchester University, in the heydays of the “Madchester” music scene.

He got part-time work filming bands like the Happy Mondays, Joy Division and the Stone Roses in Manchester’s Hacienda club, and shooting late-night shows such as ITV’s *The Hitman and Her*, hosted by Pete Waterman and Michaela Strachan.

Prior also filmed Asian TV shows around Bhangra music, which was “hugely good fun” and a world away from the “middle-aged white enclave” in Cambridgeshire where his family then lived.

He spent the next decade filming at Elstree Studios in Hertfordshire. His office was directly above that of Chris Tarrant, when he was presenting *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire*.

He also became interested in a new technology that was starting to take off – the internet – and became managing director of one of the UK’s first online media and marketing companies, Eftel Technologies, which agreed contracts with Tesco, HSBC and Asda.

Prior was spending most of his time being a



The helicopter landed by special permission on the school field to whisk a student and mum to the Isle of Wight for a special holiday.

“contracts manager, which wasn’t really me” and, when the “investment taps suddenly turned off” after the dot-com crash in 2000, he turned his sights to the education world.

Loving school

After guest lecturing on post-16 media courses, in 2004 Prior got a job on the senior leadership team at Sir John Lawes School in Harpenden, Hertfordshire, after it received “significant” government funding for a media arts specialism. Prior launched production courses from their “impressive” new TV and sound studios.

He became executive producer of “dozens of student film productions at any one time”, going out on location with budding film-makers.

Ofsted described the school’s media provision

Profile: Alex prior



Science - the classic exploding hydrogen bubbles. Etonbury Academy.

and its leadership at that time as 'excellent'. Despite only planning to stay for two years – education not being part of his “game-plan” – Prior “absolutely loved” it and stayed for 10.

He also enjoyed leading behavioural initiatives, which later motivated him to deliberately seek to lead schools with challenging cohorts.

But, before that, he wanted to pass his QTS. Having developed his pedagogy through “CPD and learning from colleagues”, his teaching was “an amalgam of different styles”. The training was a chance to consolidate them.

Being observed was not a problem – during his internet career, Prior had been named The Times' London business innovator of the year, which involved lots of public presentations. He was always “quite comfortable standing up in front of people”.

But his next career moves knocked some of the confidence out of him. After leaving Etonbury feeling “quite melancholy” in 2018, he took on Wenlock C of E Junior School in Luton. The school was in a “disengaged community” and had had two successive ‘requires improvement’ grades.

Under Prior, three successive section 8 inspections praised the school. Then he took on the leadership of Crawley Green Infant School next door, spreading his leadership team across both.



‘Nothing gives me a bigger thrill than a young person saying, I really enjoyed your book’

Devastating Ofsted

His staff spent the pandemic working flat out delivering food parcels and ensuring that every child had a device on which to study remotely. One teacher with medical vulnerabilities “pleaded” to be allowed to teach face to face during lockdowns, which “brought a tear” to Prior’s eye.

Then, in November 2021, while a third of the school were still absent with Covid, Ofsted gave the school an ‘inadequate’ rating. Prior was devastated. The school has since closed.

He believes that Ofsted was “stamping on schools to almost prove a relevance that they hadn’t had” during Covid lockdowns.

The judgment came as a shock because Prior believed he had introduced “real pride” to the community and boosted results from “pretty much the lowest in town” to the “top three”.

The injustice made him rethink his headship career. “I wasn’t prepared to see decent people being put through this process,” he says. “Some of my wonderful team had been reduced to wrecks.”

Sherlockian success

But his turbulent years at Wenlock were not wasted. After working “flat out” each day, he would

spend the evenings writing a book – *The Lost Case Files of Sherlock Holmes* – in the prose style of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Nobody was more surprised than Prior when it went to number one in several Amazon chart categories. To date, it has sold almost 30,000 copies.

Then Prior embarked on a different sort of education career – one that is not “all consuming” like a headship and allows him time for writing.

As well as helping to oversee teacher training at around 1,000 schools across the Home Counties through Chiltern Teaching School, he delivers training on working with pupils for whom English is an additional language for the Bell Foundation.

Life is not easy for his Chiltern trainees, who increasingly have to teach subjects they are not trained up in, due to school staffing shortages.

Prior congratulates them for choosing “a genuinely noble profession”, which “we can lose sight of in all the noise and political nonsense”.

He believes that everyone has, like him, “room for several careers in their lifetime”. He is particularly relishing his current one.

“Nothing gives me a bigger thrill than a young person saying, ‘I really enjoyed your book.’”

Opinion

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The sector's manifesto

KULVARN
ATWALExecutive headteacher, Highlands
Primary School and Uphall
Primary SchoolTwo priorities to redesign
accountability for good

As election campaigns are launched, Kulvarn Atwal draws on the Headteachers' Roundtable's manifesto to call for wholesale reform of school accountability

Every school team wants to be held accountable. In fact, we actively welcome it. But our accountability framework is actively stifling us in our efforts to support school improvement, and that surely shouldn't be the case.

What we want are accountability measures that empower schools to work collectively to impact positively on all pupils' broad learning outcomes.

And what we need is an accountability system that recognises that the best performance comes from leaders, teachers and pupils who are well, respected and thriving.

What we have instead is a regime with only one defender: the Secretary of State for Education, who can use the system to disingenuously claim that so many more schools are 'Good' or 'Outstanding' than under their predecessor.

The consensus everywhere else is that single-phrase Ofsted judgments are not fit for purpose. There is also growing consensus that the zero-sum approach to school performance at key stages 4 and 5 is at best misleading, and at worst

downright damaging.

Pitting school against school for results and accolades disincentivises inclusive school leadership. And amid recruitment and retention challenges that this policy is at least in part responsible for, it is only fanning the flames of crisis.

Deliver us from deliverology

The current climate is defined by valuing only what we can measure easily. Last week's key stage 2 SATs, for example, are designed primarily to hold schools accountable, not to support students' learning.

Worse, this performance data-driven approach has resulted in successive waves of perverse incentives. Progress 8 was a well-intentioned attempt to move away from policies that gamed the system in favour of some young people and some grades. But it doesn't acknowledge context and, even more importantly, it is itself entirely gameable.

Successive governments have sought to boil the entirety of school performance down to single measures. This has caused untold damage.

So the next government must urgently and thoughtfully develop a set of metrics that can effectively tell the whole story of a school. A fit accountability system must capture the impact of schools and their staff teams on the learning

“ The current system has had
disastrous results for inclusion

and life chances of all students in an equitable and inclusive way.

Such a system must be based on the rich data schools already collect, and account for the stories every leader can tell about what lies behind the numbers. It must look beyond test results to important factors like exactly who attends a school, how long they are there, whether they effectively make it through their full school career and where they are years down the line.

And as for results, these must account for how education impacts students as citizens and human beings: their social, personal, emotional and academic development.

From inspection to improvement

In recent months, Ofsted has successfully achieved the unimaginable: it has unified the profession. And that unity is in the certain knowledge that the current system of inspection is not fit for purpose. In fact, it runs counter to school improvement.

To replace it, we need a genuinely independent body that works with schools and trusts to support and improve peer and self-evaluation.

What drives school improvement is developmental critique, not cut-and-paste judgments in standardised rubrics. Also damaging is throwing a school community into turmoil for a limiting judgment that can be altered in a few weeks.

Safety is of course paramount, as is inclusion. Separate annual reviews will be ample to check safeguarding and school roll activity.

The only argument left in the tank to defend the current system boils down to informing parents. There are ways of making descriptive inspection reports accessible to all. And besides, a dashboard encapsulating richer performance data will do most of that work – and do it better.

For too long, we have been operating under systems of flawed performance measures and inspection that have rewarded those who played and won the zero-sum game. It's had disastrous results for inclusion, curriculum, staffing and mental health.

The next government can change the accountability landscape for good. And all it will take is a little more faith in schools and their communities.

Opinion

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NIGEL BRUNNING

Chief finance officer, South East Essex Academy Trust

Asleep on the job? How trusts have missed out on £53 million

New research shows academy trusts have failed to capitalize on interest rates and are likely missing out on more gains this year, explains Nigel Brunning

The largest 180 trusts in the country missed out on £53m of income that they could have earned last year if they had organised their treasury operations more efficiently. For the current year the amount foregone could exceed £100 million. This is all money that could have been flowing into education from the banking sector.

What is noticeable in the research conducted by the South East Essex Academy Trust Institute is the wide stratification of trust performance at all levels of trust size. Only one-quarter of them were deemed to have performed well in this area, with about half showing room for significant improvement.

In the category of large trusts, the best in class was Oasis, which earned £2.2million in interest on its £56 million of cash. By contrast, the trust at the bottom of the large trusts list earned only £4,000 on its £35 million of cash, missing out on £1.4 million in interest it could have had if it managed treasury as efficiently as Oasis.

Interest rates were low for almost a decade until mid-2022. For this reason, treasury management may

have fallen off the radar of trustees and CEOs. It's not typically an item you see on finance committee agendas but it should be carefully scrutinised and CFOs held to account.

Trustees and CEOs need to raise their awareness in this area. It is, after all, public money and we are rightly required to demonstrate good stewardship. That means obtaining a good return on cash while at the same time minimising risk.

There certainly needs to be better sharing of good practice across the sector. Even if money is kept with a trust's current bankers, there are a plethora of deposit account types available, including instant access savers, 35 or 95-day notice deposits, and fixed-term deposits from one month upwards. These different account types allow for flexibility to suit the cashflow requirements of any school or trust.

Another practice we sometimes see the most efficient trusts use is to immediately transfer nearly all the funds out of the current account when the GAG money lands at the start of the month and deposit it in an instant access saver account with same-day transfers in and out. The funds can then be transferred back towards the end of the month for payroll and other bills.

Often, the best savings rates may not be available through existing



“ This year the sum foregone could exceed £100 million

bankers. Setting up new bank accounts with alternative bankers can be slow and time-consuming but worthwhile once actioned. One route around this is to use cash management companies.

As Kreston Reeves highlighted in its Academies Benchmark report 2024: “For those that want to look at the wider market, without the hassle of opening numerous bank accounts, there are banking platforms that make this simpler. For these platforms Trusts go through the money laundering process once.”

Trusts can then set their own criteria for how their funds are invested, including the financial strength of the institutions, the duration of deposits and the maximum they want to invest with any one institution. However, these platforms do tend to charge a fee, so it's crucial to ensure those don't offset the extra interest earned.

One thing that needs to be carefully borne in mind is the risk profile of where money is being deposited. Many will remember the huge sums lost by local authorities

with Icelandic banks in 2008, even though the structure of Icelandic banking was questioned in the financial press at the time. In the same year, Lloyds and RBS/NatWest had to be bailed out by the UK government as it was considered too big to fail. More recently, Silicon Valley Bank collapsed in March 2023.

In the wake of the 2008 banking crisis, the Bank of England and other EU and worldwide organisations brought in stricter capital adequacy ratios in order to help reduce the chance of future crises in the banking sector.

The Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS) also protects each legal entity with up to £85,000 deposited with any banking group.

However, the best defence remains a skillful and knowledgeable CFO with good commercial awareness. That goes for maximizing revenue as well as minimizing risk.

Read the full research by The SEEAT Institute [here](#)

Opinion

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JULIA HARNDEN
Funding specialist, Association of School and College Leaders

Safety valve agreements are making the SEND funding crisis worse

The pernicious effects of prioritising deficit reduction over investment in children’s needs are spreading across the whole system, says Julia Harnden

If you were looking for the best way to spend £1 billion on special educational needs support, would you (a) spend it on children or (b) on a complicated deficit recovery scheme?

I’m guessing that most people would probably opt to spend it on children. The government, however, has gone for option b.

Of course, the government would not put it like that. They would probably say they are working with local authorities to ensure their high-needs budgets are sustainable.

But the reason that they are unsustainable – and why so many are in deficit – is because the government hasn’t provided enough funding to keep pace with rising demand.

This year there is a £10.5 billion pot for high-needs funding. This is the money set aside for children and young people with special educational needs – from birth to the age of 25 – who require extra help and specialist support.

The size of the pot has grown by about 60 per cent in cash terms over the past five years, but it has

been comprehensively outstripped by growth in demand.

The pot is managed by local authorities, which passport money to the frontline providers of special educational needs support such as schools, colleges and alternative provision settings.

As demand for frontline services has grown many local authorities have gone into overdraft on their high-needs block. This overdraft continues to grow, and it is estimated that it will total more than £3.5 billion by March 2025.

Government and the sector are in agreement: big overdrafts are not a good thing. However, how these deficits are tackled has a huge impact on young people’s education and life chances.

It is currently being done via two government-initiated schemes: the Safety Valve Programme for the 38 authorities with the highest deficits, and the Delivering Better Value Programme for the 55 authorities with slightly lower deficits.

Taken together, this means over half of local authorities have accumulated deficits that require intervention as they battle to meet increasing demand.

Under the programmes, the local authorities receive extra funding and are expected to make savings in order to make their high-needs budgets sustainable.



“ Safety valves are supposed to release pressure, not add to it

Reports suggest more than £1 billion will have been spent on safety valve programmes by the end of the decade. Even then, it is not clear how many local authorities will have actually eradicated their overspends; it will not be all of them.

This is a broken system. Additional money allocated to high-needs provision is disappearing into the black hole of deficit recovery and never reaching the frontline where it is so desperately needed.

Any system for allocating public money must be fair and effective, and the current system is neither. It will only be equitable when all young people have access to what they need to succeed, and effective when all available funding can be targeted towards improving the system for those who rely on it.

If the government is serious about improving the SEND system, it has to stop this madness: freeze the overdraft, draw a line under the deficits and get the money to where it can make a difference.

The School Cuts coalition’s

analysis shows that the special educational needs system needs an additional £4.6 billion in revenue funding just to stop the situation getting any worse.

And it is surely obvious that all the money available for supporting children goes into supporting children – not into deficit recovery schemes.

Because the government is failing to sort this, the pernicious effects of under-investment are spreading across the whole system.

For example, safety valve agreements are driving already cash-strapped local authorities to move money meant for schools into the high-needs block. And top-up funding to support children with complex needs in mainstream schools ends up determined by financial constraint rather than need.

A safety valve is supposed to be a device which releases pressure – not something that adds to that pressure. It clearly isn’t working and a faulty valve needs replacing.

Opinion

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JOSHUA COLEMAN

Chief executive officer,
East Midlands Academy Trust

How we topped the table for attendance success

Our schools' competitive spirit is driving us to better and better attendance – but a league table like ours must be part of a wider approach, writes Joshua Coleman

Everyone likes a bit of healthy competition, right? Whether it's the title race in the Premier League or the fight for the Christmas number one spot, friendly rivalry can prove beneficial. This is why we introduced trust-wide league tables as one strand of our ongoing bid to drive up attendance.

Schools up and down the country are being tasked with improving attendance. Our trust sees consistently above-national-average attendance levels, but there is always more we can do.

Our attendance league table is a way to drive that for all our pupils. It includes overall, year-to-date, pupil premium and SEND attendance, as well as the number of late arrivals and missing marks (which contribute over time to lost learning hours).

It's sent out every Monday and includes the national benchmarks to baseline against. We have adapted the metrics to ensure weekly attendance is mapped against year-to-date so that the table is not static with the same "winners" each week.

Each school also sends out a weekly newsletter that includes

attendance data so parents can be part of the process.

Lessons being learned

Needless to say, league tables aren't always popular (just ask relegated Sheffield United). When it was first introduced, ranking the weekly attendance rates across our demographically diverse multi-academy trust received a mixed response. Some saw it as a challenge to rise to, others were less competitive. Presenting the data using the weekly average against the year-to-date gave everyone a fighting chance of coming top.

Another hurdle was the time commitment to not only implementing the systems to capture the data but training the staff to interpret the figures and use them in a meaningful way. Ultimately this takes people time to process and apply.

But this league table is just one small strand of our approach to driving up attendance. The key to making it work is ensuring everyone feels supported to compete, and that they're doing it on an even field.

Inclusion is at the heart

A central part of our wider, inclusive approach has been significant investment in supporting the wellbeing and mental health of colleagues and pupils. We've built three inclusion units specialising in

“Some saw it as a challenge, others were less competitive

aspects of ASD and SEMH, bringing additional expertise into our schools' ecosystem.

And rather than bemoan a lack of external services, we have contracts for specialist support including educational psychologists and speech and language therapists, as well as a partnership with the Northamptonshire NHS Integrated Care Board mental health transformation team. As a result, mental health support teams are embedded in our schools.

Positive relationships, an engaging curriculum, staff development, the physical estate and infrastructure – supplemented by a support package for wellbeing and mental health – are what makes our pupils want to be in school.

Being forensic to boost resources

But we also need the nudge factor, and we do that by tracking attendance to target resources effectively. Over the past year we have become increasingly forensic.

To enable this, we have one shared IT platform and management information system. Its bespoke range of dashboards enables trust-wide scrutiny by our central data analyst, Gregory Dabor. All trusts need a Gregory.

However, to ensure attendance is a trust-wide focus we also make the dashboards and systems accessible to everyone according to their role, including the governance functions. As a result, anyone can cut the data in any way and present it clearly for use.

We've also worked with family liaison teams to co-produce template letters, emails and texts for schools' use, including where

attendance is positive.

And to complement all of that, we also have a clearly defined behaviour curriculum, which includes contracts with parents to build a partnership and maximise impact. With one of the 30 Department for Education national behaviour hub schools in our trust, we know that clear, positive and consistent expectations are what allow schools to feel safe and be welcoming places to learn.

Attendance will fluctuate. People may fall ill or go on holiday. Some have long-term needs and some have cultural and religious duties.

But if the curriculum is right and attendance is everyone's priority, then all will thrive – regardless of who wins the league.



Solutions

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SHARATH JEEVAN

Founder, Intrinsic Labs

How to lead through inflection moments

At times of big change and high pressure, effective leaders bring their teams back to their core values to motivate them for the challenge, explains Sharath Jeevan

As education leaders, we are leading in challenging times and in an even more challenging system. As a result, national surveys show that a staggering 40 per cent of teachers express intentions to leave the profession (even more among those within the first five years of their career).

The typical culprits are extreme accountability and compliance pressures. These often create workload stresses that feel like they have nothing to do with tangibly supporting the children we teach.

But what makes the job feel truly untenable is increased demand for all those things we do that aren't measured or evidently valued by accountability.

Cumulatively, we end up with what I refer to as an 'inflection moment', when something needs to change in response to new circumstances. This is the case now, with attendance failing to recover, SEND demand growing far beyond our capacity to meet it, mental health and behaviour plummeting

and much more.

Rightly, there are calls for a better-designed education system, but that won't happen overnight. Indeed, a new government would itself represent an inflection moment, with the profession called upon to deliver reform.

However, there is still a lot we can control here and now.

Our primary focus should be to help our teams recognise inflection moments and prepare them to face these, whether they're on a departmental scale, at the school level or across a trust.

Put simply, the key is to focus on the next mountain that you, your teams and your organisation need to climb. Shift your attention away from (or more precisely, beyond) Ofsted and league tables, and towards articulating the deep and authentic direction your school or MAT wants to take to make a deep and distinctive difference to the young people and communities you serve.

I refer to this as a 'small p' purpose. 'Big P' purpose is what drives you individually as a leader, and will determine how you contribute to these objectives personally.

For instance, a MAT I worked with realised that robust relationships were fundamental in understanding the challenges young people faced



“ Focus on the next mountain to climb

within their communities. They built an exciting direction centred around the essence of relationships, integrating this principle into everything they did, spanning from staff to student experiences.

In this context, Ofsted and league table pressures were relegated to necessary hoops to jump. Their real direction and purpose came from that deep focus on meaningful relationships.

Doing this work can seem like a distraction from pressing demands. In fact, it is a powerful alignment tool from which you can embed authenticity, connection and excellence in your organisational culture and nurture the potential of staff and students.

It's a question of helping your team tap into their intrinsic motivation and thereby shielding them from external stresses. Reconnecting with the deeper needs of the children they are teaching, feeling in control of their classroom and having a sense of getting better over time are crucial to this.

A lot of the motivational

challenges in the teaching workforce today stem from teachers not seeing their work fit into a bigger journey. That's something we can make a deep dent in as leaders. Indeed, aligning direction with team potential and motivation is arguably the most important leadership skill we need to develop.

Think of direction as being like the hour hand of a watch, potential being the minute hand and motivation being the second hand. All have to move together like clockwork. This forms the core of the DIAL framework I explore in my book and in my practical work with schools and trusts.

The recruitment and retention crisis is itself an inflection moment for school leaders. Something systemic does need to change to support us through it, but by reconnecting with our authentic purpose, we can at least reduce the impact of some of the pressures that come at us from the education system itself.

And that can only be a good thing – for us and for our teams.

THE REVIEW

THE CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT HANDBOOK

Authors: Oliver Lovell and Dr Mark Dowley

Publisher: John Catt

Publication date: March 22, 2024

ISBN: 1398388432

Reviewer: Sam Strickland, Headteacher, The Duston School

I wouldn't presume to criticise military operations based on my telly viewing of SAS: Who Dares Wins. So why do teachers suffer criticism from armchair experts?

Luckily for us all, authors Oliver Lovell and Dr Mark Dowley have worked in teaching, still do it, and they know the reality.

Behaviour has been a hot topic of debate for as long as I have been in the profession. It is a major push factor for staff quitting. According to the latest Edurio behaviour surveys, it is also a fundamental school improvement driver and a critical issue that many school leaders can easily fall upon their sword over.

Central concerns revolve around pupil and staff safety and ensuring teachers can teach and pupils can learn. Recent research shows as much as nine minutes of learning is lost in any given 30-minute block of teaching, and the situation has only intensified and worsened since Covid.

That's tough enough for any leader to deal with, but behaviour also appears to polarise opinion more than any other aspect of education. I liken this debate to the Bolshevik revolution's conflict between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' – but in reverse.

In my analogy, the 'haves' are those who work in schools day in and day out and have the battle scars to prove it. The 'have nots' simply have not done the job. And yet it is they who offer advice with terrifying conviction and confidence from their remote perspectives – and the 'haves' who are beleaguered by their privilege.

The Classroom Management Handbook is a really well-crafted educational book. The

overarching feeling it leaves you with is that Dowley and Lovell talk absolute sense (some may argue common sense). Yes, their advice and guidance is backed by research, but it is also – and crucially – grounded in having lived and breathed their core messages with children.

A real lure with this book is a full acknowledgement that teachers are time poor. Lovell and Dowley not only acknowledge this but have crafted their book in such a manner that even the most time-pressured of colleagues can make use of it. You could read this handbook from cover to cover or dip in and dip out of it. It's an approach I've taken with my own books, so I really appreciate it.

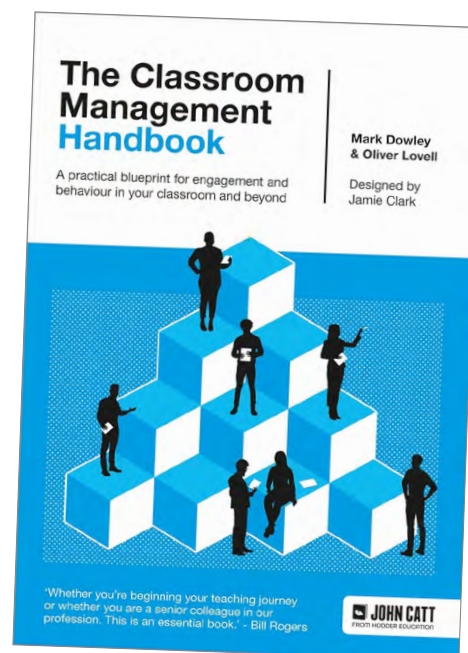
What I also really liked about this book is that it is not overloaded. There is a clear sense at the beginning of how to use it, and then it is laid out broadly in two big sections.

The first outlines Dowley and Lovell's 10 core principles for effective classroom management. The one that chimed most closely for me was the ninth of these: Students need to know they belong and that you believe in them.

I really appreciated this whole section and could not agree more about this fundamental principle in particular. If your pupils know you care, believe in them and will work hard for them, they are more likely to come with you and believe in you.

The second section explores the use of scripts and routines. This is really key as using scripts should be about building your professional confidence so that any given routine you want to establish becomes habitual and automatic.

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This seriously reduces your own cognitive load and frees up your capacity to focus on other things.

And in keeping with that aim, the number of routines is kept to a manageable minimum so that you won't be left feeling overwhelmed. The section contains 18 of them, all neatly explained and unpacked to ensure you can do more than just have a go at them – you can actually master them.

Whether you are new to the profession, a seasoned teacher or a leader looking to cement your ideas and thinking, there's something in *The Behaviour Management Handbook* for you. Dowley and Lovell have done the heavy lifting. You simply get to apply their advice in a way that's relevant to you and your context.

Bill Rogers endorses this book as 'essential'. I'm happy to agree.

★★★★☆
Rating

THE CONVERSATION LISTENING IN ON THE DIGITAL STAFFROOM



Zara Simpson

Deputy head of
prep, Streatham and
Clapham High School

THE FINAL PUSH

With the end of the academic year in sight, pupils across the country are gearing up for end-of-year exams, embarking on enriching residentials and eagerly anticipating what the new academic year will hold. For many, this is a time of endings and new beginnings. For others, the transition brings a mix of emotions, from excitement to anxiety.

Transitioning between year groups (especially moving from primary to secondary school) can be a daunting experience. This pivotal moment is often accompanied by questions such as, "Will I like it there? Will I make friends? How will I manage the new demands of a challenging curriculum?" These are natural fears of the unknown.

As a deputy head teacher, I see first-hand the significance of this transition, particularly focusing on the mental health challenges and anxiety that many year 6 pupils experience. Ensuring a smooth transition involves a multifaceted approach.

So I was glad, in the course of my research, to find a range of useful support online. Beyond practical resources for primary and secondary schools like those from the [Anna Freud Centre](#) for mental health research, I also came across some useful blogs.

Among these was this gem from [Natalie Fogden for HFL Education](#) sharing insights on facilitating a seamless transition for

BLOG

SEND



A blog exploring top tips and strategies to support pupils with SEND as they transition from primary to secondary school.

pupils with SEND. And for a comprehensive look at the issue, I found [Sita Brahmachari's blog](#) with a toolkit for transition particularly useful.

If you want to join the conversation, share your own great practice or network with others to develop your transition work, there are opportunities for that too. The [National Literacy Trust](#) is hosting an online event discussing transition to secondary through Matt Goodfellow's book, *The Final Year*. Meanwhile, founder of the Shy and Mighty podcast Nadia Finer is hosting a [webinar for teachers](#) in June which provides guidance on supporting students into year 7.

Schools are already doing lots, of course, but amid a youth mental health crisis it's vital we do everything we can to ensure pupils feel prepared, supported and confident for the next chapter in their educational journey.



SUPPORT WITH REPORTS

The summer term also brings the production of end-of-year reports. As a deputy headteacher, it's crucial to me that these meaningfully reflect each pupil's academic development, social growth and overall wellbeing.

However, achieving consistency and fairness can be challenging due to varying teaching styles and pupil needs. Clear expectations and standardised criteria are vital to ensure accuracy and meaningful

reflection of each pupil's progress.

It's in this context that I found Professor Rose Luckin's [edtech podcast on AI in education](#) particularly useful. Here, she discusses AI as a tool for equity in learning, highlighting its potential to analyse data, provide early interventions and enhance accessibility.

We're not there yet, but there's substantial benefit on the horizon in terms of workload and consistency if AI can help with this vital yet time-consuming task.



THE DIGITAL TRANSITION

Which brought me to thinking more broadly about education in our digital age and striking the right balance between promoting digital literacy and avoiding over-exposure.

In school, our key considerations include ensuring software aligns with curriculum goals, is purposefully integrated into teaching and learning, and doesn't lead to an over-reliance on screens that undermines physical activity and wellbeing.

But of course, this affects pupils at home too. How can we set children homework on screens and simultaneously discourage unhealthy tech use?

This week, Streatham & Clapham High School headteacher Cathy Elliott shared her view on [schools' duty to guide parents on controlling smartphone use](#). And she's far from alone in considering agency, risk and safety in this context. This blog from the [Council of British International Schools](#) does just that, and this [European Schoolnet podcast](#) also includes a discussion on screen time and mobile use in schools.

So as I sign off from this column for this year, my thoughts aren't just on school transition as an event for children. More broadly, it's clear school itself is in the grip of a transition. It's on us to harness the benefits and minimise the risks.

Click the links to access
the blogs and podcasts



The Knowledge

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



How are schools dealing with increased parental complaints?

Dai Durbridge, Education team partner, Browne Jacobson

The rising volume and complexity of complaints schools are handling has been a major theme in our conversations with school leaders since the pandemic.

Anecdotal evidence on this subject has now been supported by hard data. In Browne Jacobson's spring 2024 School Leaders Survey – completed by more than 200 school and trust leaders collectively representing around 1,800 schools responsible for nearly a million pupils – almost two-thirds (65 per cent) said complaints increased this year, with 30 per cent reporting a 'substantial rise'.

A broad range of issues are being raised, with support for special education needs and behaviour and discipline cited by 20 per cent of schools that receive complaints. Other grievances relate to equality, discrimination and transgender issues (12 per cent), parental responsibility (10 per cent) and safeguarding (7 per cent).

The impact is clear: ninety per cent believe it's having a detrimental impact on staff wellbeing, with quality of education and staff retention also cited among the knock-on effects.

Get off the back foot

Our advice to schools has always been to adopt a proactive approach in their complaints-handling processes, rather than find themselves on the back foot when a grievance is raised.

It's therefore pleasing to see many telling our survey about the various proactive steps they are taking.

Training is the most common, with 51 per cent saying this has been delivered to school leaders, while 43 per cent trained trustees and governors, and 26 per cent trained classroom staff.

Capacity to manage complaints has been addressed in some cases, with 26 per cent of leaders reallocating staff time to manage investigations and 18 per cent appointing a complaints co-ordinator. Forty three per cent



have instructed legal advisers to support with complaints management.

Innovative solutions are being explored too. Some have introduced parental helpdesk technology and the use of an artificial intelligence-powered parental complaints portal to de-escalate complaints.

Reviewing procedures is a priority

Meanwhile, 39 per cent of schools have introduced new complaints procedures as part of their internal reviews into managing the issue.

This should be priority number one for school leaders, who must be prepared to take a genuine, fresh and holistic review of the processes that underpin complaints management.

Auditing complaints will help them to identify common themes, gaps in staff training and potential improvements that could be made regarding communication with parents.

Small tweaks to communication can have large rewards. The CEO of one trust told us their school had not taken any new steps to complaints management processes. Instead, they had worked hard on their relationships with parents.

Indeed, equipping staff to deal with unhappy parents is often the best de-escalation strategy. The ability to explain what steps are being taken and manage expectations can prevent informal concerns from progressing into formal complaints.

Given that 71 per cent of respondents believe parents and carers are quicker to escalate concerns, this should be a major consideration.

Help wanted on vexatious complaints

Within the wider issue of handling complaints is the thorny subject of vexatious complaints. Common behaviours fitting this broad description include personal attacks, excessive and overly complex emails, raising multiple complaints about the same issue and an insistence on unrealistic outcomes.

More than half (54 per cent) of the school leaders we surveyed said they want clearer government guidance on the difference between vexatious complaints and unreasonable behaviour, and how to handle them.

Evidence-based guidance from policymakers will help schools to comply with their legal obligations while feeling confident in their decision-making.

For example, understanding their statutory duties to respond, and the circumstances that may lead to restricting parents' access to staff and school premises, will help leaders to create suitable boundaries when dealing with these types of behaviours.

Enhanced guidance is crucial to give schools greater clarity over an issue that is becoming increasingly complex and a drain on resources.

But while we might expect this in due course, it won't arrive overnight. This makes it all the more important for school leaders to understand the root causes and be proactive in initiating change from within.


Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

FRIDAY

Even Ofsted's own senior staff are now throwing shade on one-word judgments.

Speaking to the BBC, the watchdog's south-east regional director Matthew Purves admitted that its "weakness is it's simple".

To be fair, he did also point out the judgments' "strength" is being "really clear for parents".

Purves added: "As well as working in education for 20 years or more, I'm a parent and, when I sit around with other parents and they think about schools, they start with that one-word judgment. It helps them understand. That's a strength."

"But the weakness is it's simple, and so you shouldn't stop the conversation there."

MONDAY

A few weeks ago, schools minister Damian Hinds confused MPs when he said it was "incorrect" that the government missed its secondary teacher recruitment target by 50 per cent this year, a fact borne out in government data.

His comments prompted a "point of order" from Lib Dem education supremo Munira Wilson, and now a clarification letter.

Hinds said he "misheard" Wilson and claimed he thought that she was asking about the increase in the number of teachers overall.

But, as *Schools Week* has pointed out before, while there are 27,000 more teachers now than there were in 2010, pupil numbers have risen by almost twice as much.

However, Hinds also doubled down in his response to Wilson – insisting that considering the postgraduate ITT target

alone "ignores other key routes into teaching, provides an incomplete view of recruitment, and can present a misleading view of overall teacher sufficiency". LOL

Meanwhile, while we are on clarifications, the DfE's top civil servant Susan Acland-Hood told the public accounts committee last month of "examples through 'safety valve' of councils that have reduced and in some cases removed their deficit through the work they've done".

The safety valve scheme is where the government gives councils with big high-needs deficits multi-million pound bailouts if they slash their spending on SEND provision.

So, who were the councils that have eliminated their deficit? Well, a follow-up letter to the committee states that Richmond is actually the only council to have "all but" eliminated its deficit. It is still actually £300,00 in the red.

But Acland-Hood said deficit data for 2023-24 is due within the next few months and "our monitoring of LAs shows the great majority are on track" to reduce deficits.

However, as the deals run between five and nine years – that is the least you would expect.

TUESDAY

The Observer reported back in September that Nadhim Zahawi, while education secretary, saw regular alerts cross his desk on the danger of RAAC in schools but did nothing as the government was "trying to get away with spending as little as they could".

Zahawi left office in July 2022, with the RAAC scandal exploding in September

last year as ministers finally took action after roof collapses at several schools.

Schools Week asked under the Freedom of Information Act for copies of the supposed five submissions made to Zahawi in early 2022. The DfE said it had relevant information related to the request – but refused to release it.

We appealed to the information commissioner's office, but they sided with the DfE – saying they agreed that the communications were "extremely sensitive" and "concern a live and serious situation".

They said wider information published by the DfE relating to RAAC already "addresses the public interest to an adequate degree". So that's alright then!

WEDNESDAY

We have covered in detail the breadth of the DfE's cost-cutting measures – with schemes across governance, recruitment and training all axed to fund its teacher pay rise contribution to schools. One thing not being cut, however, is the school cost-cutters.

Responding to a parliamentary question, Hinds revealed that the Education and Skills Funding Agency – an agency of the DfE – spent a cool £1.5 million on consultants in 2023-24. This is up from just £345,000 the year before.

Hinds said "the majority" of this was on school resource management advisers, who are parachuted in to help leaders balance their books and suggest which stuff needs to be chopped.

Famous previous examples include an adviser telling a school to give kids less food and merge classes and just teach them in the hall!

Virtual School Assistant Headteacher for Children with a Social Worker

Salary: £47,420 - £53,630 pa

37 hours full time post

12-month contract



Reading's Virtual School is committed to supporting children and young people to achieve their educational goals and ensure they can grow, flourish, and realise their full potential.

The Assistant Headteacher for Children with a Social Worker, will provide challenge, scrutiny and support which fosters, sustains, and develops the aspirations and achievement of children with a Social Worker. The Assistant Headteacher will also line manage the Virtual School Education Advisor who leads on advice and guidance for children previously looked after, children in kinship care and supports the work of the Assistant Headteacher for children with a social worker.

Role requirements:

- Be highly aspirational for the educational attainment, outcomes, and experiences for all children with a Social Worker, children previously looked after and those in kinship care.
- Provide educational challenge, advice, and support to raise

educational outcomes for children with a Social Worker.

- Assist the Headteacher of the Virtual School in shaping the vision and direction of the Service, setting high expectations with a focus on pupil achievement and ensuring this is clearly articulated, shared, understood, and acted upon by all stakeholders.
- Be responsible for supporting schools and children's social care to achieve positive outcomes for children with a Social Worker.
- Assist the Headteacher of the Virtual School by analysing and evaluating data, enabling its use in setting targets and priorities.
- To effectively use data to target schools and support them to input interventions for children with a Social Worker to avoid underachievement.

Please refer to Job description and person specification for more information about the role, and contact Clare.Houlton@brighterfuturesforchildren.org for an informal discussion.

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