

Schools swap worship for citizenship

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SCHOOLS
WEEK

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'We face unprecedented challenges ... [but] it's clear to me we can't wait for government to fix these things. As our sector matures, we need to keep defining systems leadership and organisational strength and resilience in a way that enables us to solve them ourselves.'

That's the view of John Barneby, chief executive of one of the country's biggest academy trusts, Oasis Community Learning, writing for *Schools Week* on page 23.

It's one that seems to be prevailing.

Leora Cruddas, chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts, said last month that trusts could be doing "a lot more" to solve retention problems.

Government undoubtedly has the big levers to make big differences. But does the sector sometimes look to it to "solve all our problems", something Cruddas said she was worried about?

What's been so heartening about our Sector's Manifesto pieces is to hear from sector leaders on the solutions they are delivering, or their practical ideas on how we can improve things. (This week we hear from children's commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza on what our children want

from the next government, page 21.)

The question is an important challenge to the sector, because the likely new Labour government is not going to splash the cash.

While it might have a little leeway on some things (such as delivering a small per-pupil funding boost just by maintaining current levels despite the population dropping), it has been clear that there's no more cash until the economy improves. That private school VAT cash has already been well and truly accounted for.

But Barneby has a warning, too, for those trusts and school finding their own solutions. They must do it in collaboration, not competition.

It's no good, for instance, if large trusts swoop up all the best teachers because they can pay more, making a hard recruitment climate even harder for smaller schools.

While their own results may improve, what about the impact elsewhere?

As Barneby concludes: "We need to prioritise the development of the local education system and communities beyond the success of our trusts... it is how we will create the education system we want and our communities need."

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See story, page 13

Ofqual warns over 'unprecedented' ABS reform

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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Rishi Sunak's "Advanced British Standard" risks an increase in the volume of exams, the continuation of "unregulated" international A-levels and requires "significant investment" to deliver change on an "unprecedented scale", Ofqual has warned.

The exams regulator has issued its response to the government's consultation on the new qualification, which ministers want to see replace A-levels and T-levels in around a decade.

Here's what you need to know.



1. 'Reform on an unprecedented scale'

Ofqual said achieving the ambitions of the ABS "requires change on a scale unprecedented in England in recent decades".

"It envisages concurrent reform to curriculum, qualification content and structures, the qualifications market, and any associated technological reform."

Reform on this scale "can be delivered successfully, but its scale and complexity require significant investment of resources across all parts of the education system".

2. Start with compulsory maths and English

The regulator welcomed the "long-term reform timescale and the resourcing commitments set out in the consultation". It was "important to sequence changes carefully".

They suggested the government "consider a staged approach", with compulsory maths and English introduced as a first step "initially focussing investment on the teacher workforce here, while contributing materially to the delivery of the longer-term vision of the ABS".

3. Consider keeping A-level 'brand'

The A-level brand is "well-regarded by qualification users", with a trust built over 73 years, Ofqual said.

It is "likely that awarding organisations will continue to offer unregulated 'international' A-levels, even if the ABS means that A-levels cease to be regulated qualifications available in state schools".

"These A-levels could be taken in UK independent schools and abroad. This could present a confidence

or reputational challenge for the ABS."

The regulator said the DfE "might consider" if the aims of the ABS could be met while "retaining the identity and branding of well-established, and more recently introduced qualifications".

4. Pupils may not be ready for higher study

Ofqual also urged the DfE to consider the "wide range of achievement recognised at age 16".

For example, students achieving grade 4 in GCSE mathematics "may not have studied much of the higher tier content that typically forms the basis for study at level 3, including in the existing core maths qualification".

"Likewise, the curriculum content for English would need to be broad enough to meet a range of needs at this level."

5. 'Likely' to increase volume of exams

Ofqual warned increasing the volume of content, while maintaining grade reliability "will likely increase the volume of assessment".

This would create "challenges to address relating to exam timetabling, exam delivery in schools and colleges, and timely marking and issuing of results".

Having more exams without "increasing clashes" for students would require a longer timetable, either encroaching on teaching time or the marking period. More exam papers could also "exacerbate existing pressures, such as examiner recruitment".

6. 'Major' and 'minor' grading scale could 'mislead'

The consultation proposed a single grading scale

for "minors" and "majors" within the ABS for all routes. This "contrasts with the current established variety of grading approaches", Ofqual warned.

Supporting parity across the routes "might be better achieved in ways other than a common grading scale".

"Specifically, the direct comparability that a common grading scale appears to offer would be misleading and is likely to lead to unintended consequences."

7. 'Pass-fail' approach would lower achievement rate

The preferred option for grading the ABS is a certificate or statement of achievement with minimum attainment conditions.

Making the ABS "pass-fail" would "lead to a lower number of students achieving the overall ABS than currently achieve level 3 qualifications, potentially impacting on, for example, progression opportunities post-18".

There could also be a variation in pass rates by choice of subjects, which could "distort students' subject choices to maximise their chances of achieving an overall pass".

The second grading option – a certificate or statement of achievement without any minimum attainment conditions – presents "few technical grading challenges", Ofqual said.

The third option – an aggregate ABS score or grade – would "inevitably reduce the amount of information conveyed by that overall result compared with that conveyed by results for each major and minor".

Meet the trusts pioneering state-run private SEND schools

SAMANTHA BOOTH

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EXCLUSIVE

Academy trust leaders pioneering new state-run, independent special schools have opened up about their plans, saying if they “get it right, we could save the sector millions”.

The Beckmead Trust and Discovery Schools Academies Trust are scoping out how they could open new private SEND schools aimed at disrupting the often for-profit sector, Schools Week can reveal.

The plans followed a Schools Week investigation revealing how firms backed by private equity investors and a Middle East sovereign wealth fund were making millions in profit from running such schools.

‘Transparent and ethical’ set up

Discovery, a 16-school trust including three special schools, is speaking to councils to try and get a guarantee they would commission places for five years for a school in the East Midlands.

The trust is still looking at funding with one option being a non-profit company to seek donations.

Another is to use trust reserves for the building. But, they are seeking government clarity as it would likely need Education and Skills Funding Agency sign-off as a “contentious payment”.

Chief executive Paul Stone said either way “it’s making sure the costs are transparent to everybody –

local authorities, other schools – so they can see we are not profiteering, it’s a fully non-profit making organisation.”

The government has failed to open enough state special schools to meet demand. Instead, it has been met by private special schools – who charge much more.

Councils spent more than £1.3 billion on independent special schools in 2021-22 – double the amount spent six years earlier.

Stone said placement costs are likely to be higher than a state-funded special school, because of higher premises costs, but it will be “tens of thousands cheaper per place” than private provision.

The average cost of an independent place in 2021-22 was £56,710 – more than double the £23,224 average cost for a state special school.

“If MATs across the country did this and did



it on a transparent, ethical setup – we could dramatically put millions back into the education system,” Stone said.

“I think if we get this right, the independent sector should be extremely worried.”

‘Reverse tax-haven money flow’

Deputy chief executive Chris Bruce added it could also save councils money on transport, as children would remain in their local area.

If Discovery secures the council commitment and premises, they believe the school could be open within a year. State special schools can take years to open.

South-east based The Beckmead Trust, which runs seven special schools, is another MAT looking to set up an independent provision.

A spokesperson said they are discussing it with trustees and “are at the scoping phase to see if we can draw up a tangible plan to open a school”.

The trusts are working with consultants Premier Advisory Group, which has informed government of its plans.

Tom Legge, PAG’s managing director, said the current system is “bleeding money out of the sector and into tax havens or overseas sovereign wealth funds”.

“This is not right and needs to be challenged and this is what we are doing... We are confident that, with the support of commissioners, MATs, morally-centred independent providers and central government we will be able to slow, then stop and hopefully reverse the flow of money out

of the sector.

“This will create some space and budget for the sector to start to heal.”

Council procuring £20m school

Meanwhile in Wiltshire, the council is – for the first time – running a £20 million procurement exercise to open a 60-place independent special school for children with social, emotional and mental health needs this September.

The council is one of 34 with safety valve agreements, where sweeping reforms are made in exchange for government bailouts.

Under a maximum 10-contract, it hopes to reduce “expensive” independent special school spend. The council would provide grade two listed Melksham House on a peppercorn rent.

The provider must have expertise in running an Ofsted-registered ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ special school.

In council documents, Wiltshire said there will be a “rigorous tendering process and robust contract management” to ensure value for money.

Cllr Laura Mayes, education cabinet member, said: “This is the first time we have run a procurement exercise and while we are still in the process and can’t say a great deal more at this stage, it is important to add that our aim is to appoint an experienced, quality specialist education provider.

“We look forward to appointing an education provider who can maximise the opportunities of this beautiful setting and ensure school days work well for all.”

Tom Legge

INVESTIGATION

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Schools swap worship for mindfulness

LUCAS CUMISKEY

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EXCLUSIVE

Schools have been allowed to opt out of providing a daily act of Christian worship to teach pupils about “looking after the planet” and mindfulness instead - with one head concerned youngsters would be withdrawn if the rule was kept in place.

Seventy schools have been granted exemptions from the legal requirement to provide Christian worship since 2018, a Schools Week investigation has found.

Since 1944, schools must hold a daily act of worship that is “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character”.

However, many schools don't follow this, surveys suggest. The policy is now under the spotlight again after the high court upheld the Michaela Community School's prayer ban.

Paul Smalley, executive assistant to the chair of the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on RE (NASACRE), said: “There needs to be a fresh look by government at the legislation and the guidance around collective worship and determinations.”

Diversity and citizenship

Local authority-maintained schools and academies can opt out of the requirement by applying to their town hall's SACRE or regional directorate, respectively.

“Determinations” last for five years, but schools must still provide an alternative form of collective daily worship. These cannot be “non-religious assemblies”.

Since 2018, the Department for Education said 23 academies sought an exemption.

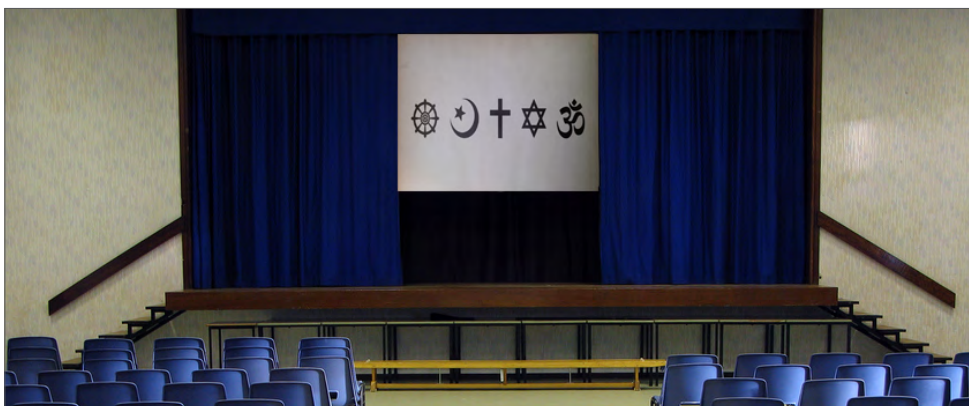
Meanwhile, LA-maintained schools accounted for 46 of the determinations approved since 2018, according to freedom of information figures from 97 councils obtained by Schools Week.

But many councils did not hold this data, suggesting the true number is likely higher.

Last year, 18 schools and academies were granted exemptions or renewals.

In May, Edith Neville Primary School in Camden was granted an extension. Its demographic is “about 90 per cent Muslim”, documents state.

Head Ruby Nasser said in the application: “I fear that there would be withdrawals [from collective worship] if a determination were not in place, which I believe would disadvantage the spiritual



development of those children.”

Parents have the right to remove under 16s from collective worship. Older pupils can withdraw themselves.

Nasser said alternative “themes are linked to our whole school topics: wellbeing, diversity and inclusion, being a local and a global citizen, looking after the planet and aspirations”.

The school also has “reflections on different religions and festivals”.

Chalkhill Primary School and Oliver Goldsmith Primary School, both in Brent, north-west London, were allowed to opt out. Many of their pupils are non-Christian.

Chalkhill headteacher Shabiha Sayed said they would have “daily reflection time in the classroom; whole school collective worship three times a week; classes delivering assemblies, which focus on religious occasions and celebrations across all faiths”.

Weekly PSHE sessions also “allow for mindfulness and reflection time”.

Primrose Hill Primary School in Camden was granted a renewal in 2021. A professional advisor to Camden's SACRE said she'd previously attended a school assembly and was “impressed with it, and with the song that the children had sung about supporting refugees”.

At the time, the schools collective worship policy said themes “often have a social, moral, spiritual focus depending on what is happening in the world”, or focus on “reinforcing the school rules or developing healthy eating”.

‘It's unlikely anyone is checking’

The latest figures appear to show a trend of fewer schools getting exemptions. Schools Week previously reported that in the 18 months to April 2017, 46 were granted.

Last year, NASACRE warned the

“majority of SACREs still do not get a sufficient share of the central school services block to enable them to carry out their duties well”.

Ofsted stopped inspecting collective worship in 2004 after 76 per cent of schools were non-compliant.

Smalley added if schools don't follow the law, it's “unlikely anybody is going to do anything”.

A 2022 Teacher Tapp survey of 8,234 respondents found 57 per cent said they did not hold a daily act of collective worship.

But Smalley said the legislation should be “interpreted quite broadly” as themes such as being a good global citizen and looking after the environment are “actually values that are of a broadly Christian nature”.

Academies minister Baroness Barran told the National Secular Society last month the DfE has “no plans to review its policy on collective worship”.

In a letter to the National Secular Society (NSS), she said the policy “encourages pupils to reflect on the concept of belief and the role it plays in the traditions and values of this country”.

“It also serves as a mechanism by which schools can develop and celebrate their ethos and values.”

She also said it was “not permissible for an exemption to be granted” to replace collective worship with “non-religious assemblies”.

Poulner Infant School had a request for an exemption snubbed by Hampshire County Council's SACRE in July 2022, which NSS flagged as an example of a school being denied permission for “secular assemblies”.

The school told SACRE that “theirs was a community school not a faith school”.

Stephen Evans, NSS' CEO, added “laws mandating worship have no place in a modern education system... the obligation should be removed from school leaders”.



Baroness Barran

Plans to scrap the cap on faith-based admissions

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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The government plans to lift the 50 per cent cap on faith-based admissions to free schools and allow special academies to have a religious character.

Ministers hope the move will allow more schools to join academy trusts run by the Church of England, the Catholic Church and other religious groups, as well as building capacity for SEND pupils.

But campaigners say the plans will “increase religious and racial segregation in our schools at a time when integration and cohesion has never been more important”.

The 50 per cent 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.

Theresa May’s government proposed in 2016 to remove the cap, but the plan was shelved by education secretary Damian Hinds in 2018, in favour of a move to make it easier to open voluntary-aided schools.

However, the Department for Education launched a consultation on the issue this week.

What are the plans?

Removing the 50 per cent cap would be delivered by “removing restrictions” on faith-based admissions in free schools’ funding agreements and updating the admissions code.

The change would mean oversubscribed free schools would be able to “adopt arrangements” within their oversubscription criteria “that allow the priority for admission on the basis of faith for up to 100 per cent of those admitted”.

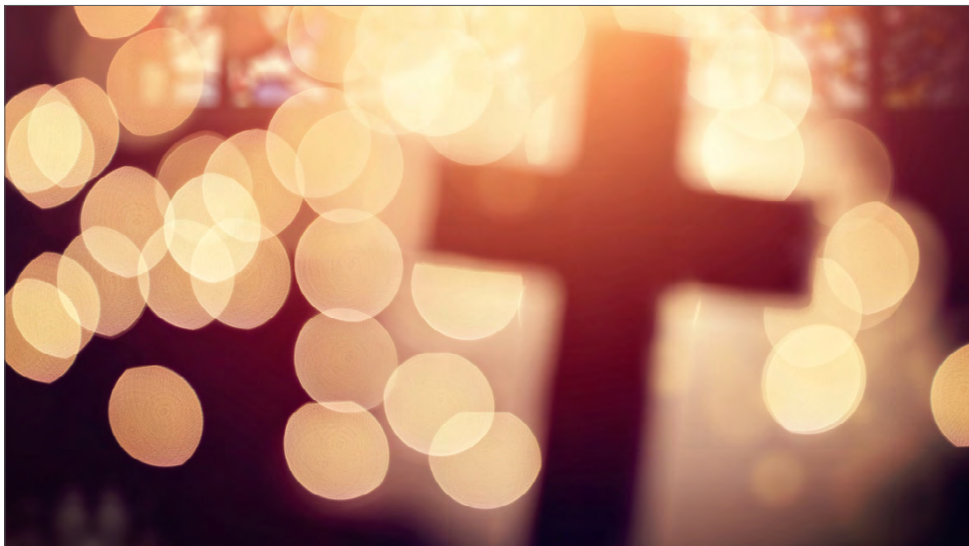
Where a free school designated with a religious character is not oversubscribed, it “must continue to admit all pupils regardless of faith”.

The change would apply to all free schools designated with a religious character, including existing free schools.

Those with a religious character that wish to remove the cap “would need to apply to vary their funding agreement to affect the change”.

At present, 95 of the 508 open free schools have a faith designation.

At present, special academies and free schools can only operate with a “faith ethos”, not a “faith character”.



Faith special schools

Ministers have also proposed a change of policy that would allow new special free schools to apply for faith character designation.

This would also apply to existing special academies that already have a registered “faith ethos”, and to existing maintained, independent or non-maintained special schools that want to become a new special academy.

The DfE said it anticipated that the proposal “would be of interest to and therefore affect, a relatively small number of schools, especially to begin with”.

It said special academies granted religious character under the scheme would benefit from “some, but not all, of the specific ‘freedoms’ that apply to mainstream schools”.

These include freedoms relating to “staffing, religious education, and collective worship”.

However, “they would not be able to admit pupils based on faith”.

Churches eye new schools push

The Catholic Education Service has not opened any free schools because of the cap, and has highlighted areas such as Stoke-on-Trent and Rotherham, where it would have liked to open schools.

However, it has not said how many it plans to open, but it is considering one in East Sussex.

Bishop of Leeds, Marcus Stock, who chairs the CES, said dioceses were “well-placed to respond to differing local educational demands around the country, including the provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities. Parents

can welcome this, also.”

The Church of England had less of an issue with the faith cap, with 37 CoE free schools already open.

However, chief education officer Nigel

Genders said “by enabling Church of England special schools, we can serve the needs of more children in more communities, irrespective of their faith background”.

But Pepe Di’lasio, general secretary of the ASCL leaders’ union, said the cap was “introduced for a good reason – to provide a balance between the needs of faith groups to have access to schools which reflect their ethos and beliefs, while also ensuring that schools are accessible to local communities”.

“This balance seems sensible and proportionate. We have seen no evidence that scrapping the 50 per cent cap will be of social or educational benefit”.

Andrew Copson, who leads Humanists UK, said the plans will “increase religious and racial segregation in our schools at a time when integration and cohesion has never been more important”.

Meanwhile, Stephen Evans, chief executive of the National Secular Society, added that creating special faith-based academies “raises ethical issues concerning the imposition of religion on children with special educational needs and disabilities”.



Andrew Copson

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NEWS: WORKFORCE

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Workforce woes hit national computing centre's CPD recruitment

LUCAS CUMISKEY

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EXCLUSIVE

The national computing centre has fallen behind on its target to provide CPD under a multi-million government contract because teachers cannot find the time to leave the classroom amid staff shortages.

Data published last week show the National Centre for Computing Education was rated 'requires improvement' for the number of teachers completing five hours of continued professional development to boost expertise in the subject.

The data, covering October to December 2023, said targets "increased significantly this quarter but there has not been a corresponding uplift in teachers completing five hours of CPD."

"This is mainly due to ongoing challenges with teacher capacity and classroom release," it added.

The government publication adds that "as a result there has been a preference for attending shorter courses, which require multiple engagements over the year for a teacher to reach trained".

While computing hubs are scheduling shorter courses over the year, the Department for Education said it was "looking at reshaping" the key performance indicator to "reflect the inability of teachers to attend CPD during school hours".

In his 2017 budget, then-chancellor Phillip Hammond pledged £84 million for a centre to upskill 8,000 existing computer science secondary school teachers.

STEM Learning then got another £20 million contract in 2022 to run the centre until August next year.

The NCCE operates nationally through a network of school-led computing hubs, which support schools and colleges "to provide a high-quality computing education to all young people".

Pepe Di'Iasio, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said: "Rather than fiddling with KPIs, the Department for Education needs to get a



grip with what is causing the problem in the first place.

"This is clearly another sign that schools are struggling with teacher shortages and workload and that people simply do not have enough time for these courses.

"CPD opportunities are hugely important – but so is having teachers in front of classes. It shouldn't be a Hobson's choice, but that's where we are at the moment."

The government's workload reduction taskforce is working on a set of proposals to help ministers meet their pledge to cut five hours from the working week of school staff.

These are due to be published this "spring".

Meanwhile a promised recruitment and retention strategy update is still yet to surface.

A STEM Learning spokesperson said they "recognise the challenges with teacher capacity and classroom release, and have worked with the computing hubs to ensure teachers are able to engage with CPD – this includes shorter courses with more engagements over the year to suit teacher timetables."



Pepe Di'Iasio

A spokesperson for the DfE added they "recognise the importance of (CPD) for teachers which is why computing hubs are exploring new ways to ensure teachers are able to get the most out of them.

"This includes shorter courses with more engagements over the year to suit teacher timetables and ensure more teachers reach 'trained' within the academic year."

It said the NCCE contract "relates primarily to the delivery of subject specific continuous professional development, amongst other initiatives to support computing teachers".



SEND reforms trial already 9 months behind

FREDDIE WHITTAKER & SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SCHOOLSWEEK

The government's £70 million programme to pilot the SEND and alternative provision reforms is "about nine months" behind schedule, with some changes going down like "a bucket of cold sick".

The Department for Education previously announced the "change programme" would test its proposed reforms to the support systems for children with special educational needs and disabilities over a period of two to three years.

That meant reforms – including new national standards – were already potentially not going to be rolled out until 2026.

Nine change programme partnerships, each made up of several councils, are trialling the changes.

Mark Vickers, chief executive of Olive Academies, which is one of four organisations working on the change programme, told the Schools and Academies Show on Wednesday it was behind schedule by "about nine months".

"And that's down to, particularly, the startup phase," he said.

"The DfE have obviously been very open about this, it took a lot longer than was anticipated. Obviously, coordinating that number of local authorities into change programme partnerships took longer than anticipated."

Proposals put forward by the government include plans for controversial "tailored lists" of



schools for parents of SEND children to choose from, as well as digitised education, health and care (EHC) plans and mandatory mediation, when parents dispute a council's decision.

Amanda Allard, director of the Council for Disabled Children, another organisation involved in the programme, said the proposals for EHC plans, strengthened mediation and tailored lists had gone down "like a bucket of cold sick".

On EHC plans, she said "I think essentially people aren't keen on change" and often local areas have put an "awful lot of effort into co-producing their own template".



Amanda Allard

Concerns about mediation and tailored lists "is really about people feeling that, if that theory of change is right, then why aren't we focusing on that specialist end? Why is all of that change capacity up there thinking about that?"

"And also, there is a bit of an

issue... until we get the theory of change moving in the right direction and us in a position of meeting more children's needs in mainstream provision, all of the special schools are full, most of the APs are full.

"So to some extent, there is a danger that an advisory tailored list will be a bit useless, because it'll tell you provisions that the local authority can't promise that you can have."

However, some elements of the proposals have gone down better during the pilot, Allard's presentation said.

These include a three-tier model for AP and a plan to introduce statutory local multi-agency panels to review and make recommendations on requests for EHC needs assessments.

The contract – which was awarded to Olive, the CDC, Impower consultancy and PA Consulting as the REACH Consortium last year – runs until March 2025.

Despite the election in the middle of that, Allard said she was "reasonably confident that a new government is unlikely to just kind of chuck it all out and start again".

The consortium will test the reforms until next year "and then the department will have to make a decision about whether or not they want testing to go on longer".

"Some of them will require legislative change. And obviously, that will not happen until there's a new parliament."

But Allard indicated the DfE would allow for non-mandatory adoption of successful reforms.

LUCAS CUMISKEY | @LUCAS_CUMISKEY

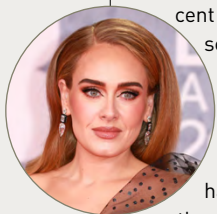
Funding: BRIT school pupils miss a (drum) beat

The prestigious performing arts BRIT School "can't afford to keep the lights on" before school so pupils – who cannot afford drum kits – can practise, its headteacher has said.

The performing and creative arts school for 14- to 19-year-olds in Croydon, south London, boasts the likes of Adele (pictured), Amy Winehouse and Rizzle Kicks among its alumni.

But, its principal Stuart Worden said he is not immune to "painful decisions" facing other heads because "there is no new money".

Despite recent funding increases from government, pay rises for teachers and support staff – as well as rising costs and pressure to pay for support services such as food banks, counsellors and mental health – are squeezing



school budgets.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates school funding next year will still be four per cent below 2010 levels in real-terms, when school-specific costs are accounted for.

On Wednesday, Worden said "a number of things [are] going to be lost. "I work at a school where people play drums. Some of those young people have not got drum kits at home, because they couldn't afford them.

"So we provide drums for drummers, who haven't got drum kits. They come into the school at seven in the morning and practise, because that's the only chance before lessons.

"We can't afford to keep the lights on at seven in the morning, because we can't afford the electricity bill, so we're now going 'how is that

going to happen?'"

He said "raising funds is what I do as a state head, which is unacceptable".

A survey by the NAHT union, published this week, found 95 per cent of heads have had to fundraise to cover basic costs such as classroom materials and building repairs.

Worden added: "The fact that my school is sponsored by the Royal Bank of Canada is a travesty. But ... they were happy to support emerging artists in this country, unlike the government".

During the panel, Luke Sibbets, research fellow at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, added his voice to calls for an NHS-style, long-term workforce plan for education. A 10-year plan would help create a "stable and long-term settlement for education".



'Trust quality descriptors miss community focus'

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

The government's "quality" descriptors for academy trusts are "short on ethics" and should have an extra pillar to focus on the work MATs do in the community, a top boss has said.

John Barneby, chief executive of the Oasis Community Learning trust, said the current descriptors could be creating "islands of schools" rather than looking at how trusts are "integrating" on a local level.

The descriptors surfaced in the schools white paper, with ministers basing them around five "pillars" now used by officials to inform academy commissioning decisions.

They are: high-quality and inclusive leadership; school improvement; workforce; finance and operations; governance and leadership.

But speaking at the Schools and Academies Show on Wednesday, Barneby called for the creation of another pillar that looks "holistically at what trusts were actually delivering" in their communities.

"[The five pillars are] descriptors of an

organisation. I'm not sure they're descriptors of education.

"They fall short in that area, they fall short in ethics and how multi-academy trusts should behave at a local level, how they should build a local system. If anything, they drive... islands of schools, rather than actually integrating local community provision."

The Department for Education fleshed out the descriptors in April, with trusts told to support flexible working, operate collaboratively and "take action to promote equality and diversity".

The guidance "represents a clear and ambitious vision for the academies sector," government said at the time. Officials also hoped it would "inform trusts' improvement and capacity-building priorities".

However, Dr Angeline Tyler, former joint chief executive of the Griffin Schools Trust, told the event the descriptors state "the bleeding obvious".

Pointing to sections of the guidance on staff retention and pupil attendance, she labelled the pillars a list of things that "are now missing from our system".

Alluding to national problems with

keeping teachers in the profession and getting children to come to school, Tyler added that the problems have been caused by "consecutive policy statements or directions".

Despite this, MATs are now "expected to not only get them back on the agenda, but to deliver" the solutions.

Barneby added the descriptors should consider the role chains play in developing children "socially, emotionally, environmentally, physically, spiritually", in addition to educational outcomes.

"I would say they're a good start," he added. "I do think there's a sixth pillar that needs to go in that is much more about what education is actually about than just the compliance model."

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

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

Dr Angeline Tyler

Sir Tim Brighouse: A life for education

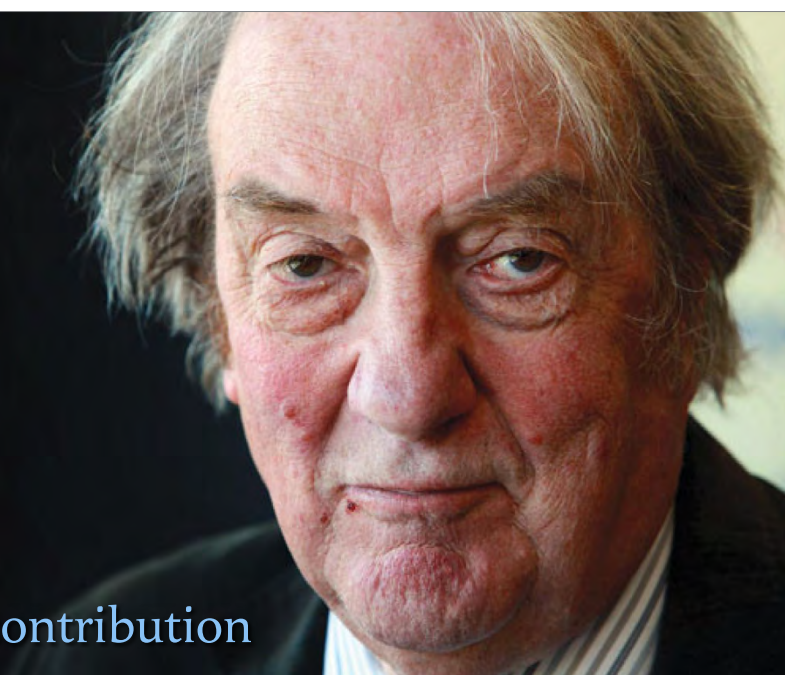
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GAG pool guidance considered

The Department for Education is considering drawing up GAG pooling guidance following controversies over the amounts trusts take from school budgets.

The move would give leaders "more support" over how to handle academy cash, said Lindsey Henning, director of schools financial support and oversight at the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

Most MATs top-slice their schools' general annual grant (GAG) cash to pay for central services.

However, growing numbers are opting to pool the money, a method that offers much less transparency, but allows them to distribute funding more evenly across their academies.

Accounting expert Will Jordan, of IMP Software, said trusts are "currently having to navigate their thinking around this without any real direction" from government.

"[Guidance] would give clarity to the sector... and help demystify this area that many leaders, both trust and school, are grappling with," he said.

Henning, who was speaking at the Schools and Academies Show, said government is "looking at" drawing up GAG pooling guidance "this year"

to "give more support [and] informed decision making".

She explained it is part of the ESFA's focus on "preventing [financial] difficulties from happening". Similar guidance was published on trust reserves.

A survey suggests a fifth of trusts GAG pool, but another 30 per cent want to do it. But it is controversial.

Unions publicly challenged plans for REAch2, England's largest primary-only MAT, to GAG pool last year, alongside a centralisation plan that involved job losses.

Staff at the Hastings Academy, in East Sussex, are preparing to ballot for strike action over the University of Brighton Academies Trust's "excessive" pooling arrangements.

Just over 13 per cent of pooled school income is retained to pay for services such as attendance support and estates teams at the trust. One school is having 20 per cent of its cash retained centrally.

Phil Reynolds, of PLR Advisory, said another problem lies when such schools are re-brokered – with leaders unsure how much funding a GAG-pooled school should leave with.

Oliver: Inspections should feel like 'peer-review'



Sir Martyn Oliver wants Ofsted inspection to feel like a "peer-review system".

Speaking at the Schools and Academies Show, the chief inspector discussed his ongoing "Big Listen" consultation, launched following the inquest into the death of headteacher Ruth Perry.

Oliver said Ofsted is on a "reform journey" and there was a "lot more to come". He is drawing up a "legislative" wishlist for government.

But stressed he was a civil servant, and the watchdog must follow government policy.

A coroner ruled in December that an Ofsted inspection at Caversham Primary School contributed to Perry's suicide.

Oliver reiterated that when he took on the job in January, he "wanted Ofsted to be of the system, by the system, for children and parents".

He stressed the "vast majority" of its workforce were serving practitioners such as heads, deputy heads and college principals, and he wants to "lean into that".

Oliver said he wanted it to feel like "in some ways, it's the professional inspectorate, which is a peer-review system".

This year, a paper by the NAHT heads' union said the "potential should be explored for a low-stakes inspection model, where regular inspection is conducted by HMI working in local patches or areas".

RD's merger mission after 'landgrabs'

A regional director is leading a "concerted effort" to speak to small trust leaders about potential mergers after the "Wild West" land grabs of early academy days left areas "looking quite dysfunctional".

Andrew Warren, the regional director for the West Midlands, has had "countless discussions" in the last year with SATs and MATs with less than four schools that aren't growing.

"In 2020, we had more small trusts than any other region," he said at the Schools and Academies Show, saying the figure was around 250.

"That doesn't seem sustainable, or it doesn't seem to be that that size would take advantage of the benefits of being a larger trust."

Warren added there has been "a concerted effort" to talk to leaders across the region to say: "I can't actually see you growing, can we talk about other options?"

He stressed he is not a MAT "dating agency", but puts trusts "in touch" with each



Andrew Warren

other.

"I think if you go back to 2010, and 2011, and 2012, the behaviours are a bit like the Wild West, there were various land grabs going on," Warren said.

"But it's left regions... looking quite dysfunctional. Part of the last four years, particularly, has been [about] trying to make sense geographically, because there is a real sense of place in our strategy."

Warren defended government clampdown on "coasting" schools, stating he wouldn't want his children to attend one.

"It's not a great school if it's been two-RI [requires improvement] for a long time".

NEWS: OFSTED

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Trust boss criticises Ofsted's complaints transparency

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE

An academy trust leader has called for greater transparency over how Ofsted handles complaints after revealing how he persuaded senior officials to "set aside" a negative report amid criticism of inspectors.

Ofsted visited Oakwell Rise Primary Academy in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, in early 2020. Inspectors told leaders it would be rated 'requires improvement'.

But the report never saw the light of day after Mark Wilson, chief executive of the Wellspring Academy Trust, complained directly to Ofsted's chief operating officer Matthew Coffey about "bullying" behaviour.

Wilson has decided to speak out after a coroner ruled in December that an inspection contributed to the suicide of Caversham Primary School headteacher Ruth Perry.

"We held up a mirror and showed Ofsted that it had a problem with some inspectors two years and 10 months before the inspection at Caversham Primary School. They had and have had ample time to put their house in order. Have they done that? And how should we know?"

Wilson called Ofsted during the inspection "incensed by the behaviour and conduct of the inspectors in this case" and the impact on the school's leaders.

"I simply did what anyone in any other walk of life would do in the circumstances, which was to pick up the telephone and demand to speak to the person at the top."

Wilson also raised a formal complaint alleging "bullying", "intimidating questioning" and problems with the inspection process.

An investigation into the conduct of the lead inspector was launched. Complaints about "onerous requests" for information and about the inspection timetable were upheld, documents seen by Schools Week show.

Complaints about the judgments awarded, a lack of communication and the accuracy of evidence were not upheld. But the inspection was deemed "incomplete" and a re-visit was carried out.

After several months, Ofsted told Wilson it had "decided not to publish this school report", and inspectors would return after lockdown.

Mark Wilson



In its letter, the watchdog said although it had "no legal power to void an inspection", it had "no duty to publish" reports on its website.

A different inspection team returned in 2021, rating the school 'good'. Inspectors said "pupils, parents and staff say that the school has been transformed". The school had been in special measures before joining Wellspring in 2017.

Wilson said the two inspections "were as different as chalk and cheese".

"For Ofsted to set-aside an inspection is, to the best of my knowledge, a rare and very significant act on their part," he added.

"We submitted a 78-page complaint about the unprofessional attitude, conduct and management of the inspection that had incensed me so much that I was prepared to take our complaint public.

"I remain firmly of the view that Ofsted did not want the detail of that complaint out in the public domain."

Wilson said the formal complaints process was "unhelpful in the extreme. I felt institutionally stonewalled and brushed off.

"It was only by acting outside of the published process direct with the chief operating officer, was I able to secure a natural justice outcome to the matter that had prompted my complaint."

A watchdog spokesperson said it had "followed our policies, including the complaints process of the time and our protocol for gathering additional evidence".

"This was happening

while the country was heading into lockdown in 2020. When inspections were suspended and our inspectors were diverted to supporting

local authorities and other priorities, the school remained unsatisfied.

"Given the unprecedented circumstances, we decided that the fair and pragmatic thing to do was to set the inspection aside until lockdown was over and we could return to the school."

Ofsted reformed its complaints process in the wake of Perry's death. It scrapped its internal review process for schools concerned their complaint was not processed completely. Schools can now go directly to the Independent Complaints Adjudication Service for Ofsted.

Inspections can now be paused for up to five days if there are concerns about wellbeing.

Tom Middlehurst, curriculum, assessment and inspection specialist at the ASCL union, said school leaders "find the lack of consistency and transparency within Ofsted's complaints process deeply frustrating".

He welcomed "small steps in the right direction", but warned there was "still a long way to go in order to win back the trust of the profession".

Wilson added: "The power asymmetry of the model is toxic."

Ofsted does not collect data on how many times it has withheld a report entirely. Schools Week understands it intends to do so in the future.



Ruth Perry



NEWS: RECRUITMENT

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'Axing funding will narrow trainee teacher pool' - charity warns

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE

The government risks narrowing its pool of potential trainee teachers by slashing funding for Now Teach, its chief executive warned, as new data showed its recruits are more likely to stay in teaching.

The charity announced at the weekend that the government was not renewing its £1.4 million-a-year contract to attract experienced career-changers into teaching, despite ministers having missed secondary recruitment targets by 50 per cent this year.

A final cohort, with 123 trainees signed up so far and almost 100 more having started an application since news of the cuts broke, starts in September. They will complete the two-year programme as planned, before the contract expires in October 2026.

The charity will stop recruiting for 2025, unless it can secure philanthropic funding.

Asked if cutting funding would narrow the pool of talent it recruits from, CEO Graihagh Crawshaw-Sadler said: "I think that is a risk."

She added: "I think due to the fact we've had career changes with significant professional experience joining the profession, wanting to talk about it – those much needed good news stories, people describing the hope and the humour that they have found in their new identity as a teacher."

Formed in 2016, the charity has helped more than 1,000 older people retrain. While it is not a teacher training provider, it helps recruit and supports career changers.

The CEO added the charity has achieved "significant" press coverage in part due to its founder, the ex-*Financial Times* journalist Lucy Kellaway.

"I think that's what proves the value for money bit," SHE SAID.

"I know there have been discussions around the cost per hire, but in addition to that, there's been this absolute freebie of amazing marketing that's created a shift in the sector."

Now Teach has also provided analysis of retention rates. It used school workforce data that had been broken down by age by the National Foundation for Educational Research.

It found that 91 per cent of over 40s who qualified with Now Teach between 2017 and 2022 remained in the profession a year after achieving



Lucy Kellaway

qualified teacher status.

This is compared to 61 per cent of new teachers in that age category overall.

After four years, 63 per cent of those Now Teach cohorts were still teaching, compared to 50 per cent in the wider country.

Crawshaw-Sadler said the increased retention was down to its content and opportunities for its teachers to "come together and learn and focus", as well as its support for teachers "when they're wobbling or when they're having a bad day".

Now Teachers also value "this sense of the club. They've given up one professional identity, but being part of the Now Teach network becomes a very important part of their second professional identity."

The charity's funding will drop by £700,000 from September. It is talking to philanthropists about providing "bridge" funding until potential future government income can be found.

Damian Hinds, the schools minister, told MPs this week, government was "re-assessing the best ways" to "grow" the number of career-changers coming into teaching to "make sure we go about it in the very best and most productive way".

"We are continuing with our career changers programme. We're not axing Now Teach. We're not re-procuring it, so we're not extending it again," Hinds told MPs.

But he added that "to put it in perspective, it's about 200 to 250 people in a typical year out of about 7,000 career changers coming into teaching".

But Kellaway said: "Assuming

you will get the same results when moving money away from successful, scalable, projects is specious reasoning.

"Education is an investment and the relatively small amounts the DfE put into Now Teach paid off in spades."

Politicians including Lord Blunkett and Baroness Morgan have criticised the axing.

Cat McKinnell, the shadow schools minister, said "more than ever we need people to consider changing to a career in teaching. Fourteen years in, the Tory government is still finding fresh ways to fail our children."

Russell Hobby, the chief executive of Teach First, also backed the charity.

While nearly a quarter of Teach First's cohort this year were career-changers, 93 per cent of those were under 40. Now Teach's average age is 47.

Now Teach has been "the most effective organisation for attracting and supporting late career switchers into the classroom, and that they remain the best organisation to keep doing this," he added.

Now Teach said it has recruited 107 per cent of its DfE contract total since 2019.

Kellaway added this was "evidence that a specialised support for career changers ensures they sign up, train and stay teaching".

"Funnelling all potential teachers through an advice service may work if you are smashing targets – but that simply isn't happening across teacher recruitment or retention."



Cat McKinnell

ANALYSIS: FUNDING

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CPD, governance and recruitment: DfE's cost-cutting spree

The Department for Education's cutting spree has continued this week – so here's the comprehensive list of the axed schemes that we know about so far

Now Teach

Recruitment programme to persuade and support high-flying professionals to change career and retrain as a teacher



Contract: £4.4 million over three years up to 2024

When does it run out? Contract will not be retendered for 2025

Potential annual saving: Around £1.4m

Impact: Supported more than 1,000 career changers into the profession since 2016

Free NPQs

Part of the Covid recovery premium, schools were given funding for 150,000 national professional qualifications for staff

Contract: £184 million available over three years to 2024

When does it run out? From Autumn, only staff in the top half of schools with the most youngsters on pupil premium will be eligible for funded NPQs. The NPQ for heads, SENCOs and leading primary maths will be free. But there will be a cap of 10,000 courses

Potential annual saving: Given the few details about the new scheme, it's difficult to work out. However, the previous funding offer equated to £1,220 per course. Providing 10,000 courses would cost £12 million, which is roughly £49 million less per year than the current average spend

Impact: Government has not published latest figures, but it's believed around 100,000 courses have been delivered

SKE courses

Suite of free subject knowledge enhancement courses, to top up teacher trainees' subject knowledge, cut from 10 to five

Contract: £122 million over four years to 2025

When does it run out? Providers are no longer able to offer free courses for primary



maths, D&T, English, biology and RE. They will still be funded for maths, physics, chemistry, computing and modern foreign languages

Potential annual saving: Again, it's difficult to work out. But a new contract for the scheme, to run from 2025, is listed as £49 million over 62 months – which is £9.5 million per year. Compared to the current contract, that is around £21 million less per year

Impact: We were unable to find any information about this in the public domain

Teaching School Hubs Council

The sector body set up to oversee and support the country's 87 teaching school hubs



Contract: Neither the DfE or the council would confirm the contract cost

When does it run out? Funding for the council will end in September

Potential annual saving: Not known

Impact: A central team of four staff helped to build capacity and growth across the country's 87 teaching hubs, which delivered more than 65,000 NPQs, early career support to more than 50,000 ECTs and training for 45,000 mentors

Inspiring Governance

A recruitment scheme for school governors and trustees



Contract: £1.38 million over two years

When does it run out? The contract will end in September

Potential annual saving: Roughly £550k

Impact: More than 8,500 governors recruited since 2016 – a third of whom are from an ethnic minority backgrounds and many for schools with "high needs"

International recruitment premium

A trial to provide £10,000 payments to help trainees and established physics and language teachers from abroad to relocate in England

Contract: The government said the trial could support up to 400 teachers, costing up to £4 million

When does it run out? The grant is no longer available to trainee teachers for 2024-25

Potential annual saving: Not known

Impact: The government has not said how many teachers applied for the trial. But, this year saw a 41 per cent increase in physics teachers and 33 per cent rise in MFL applicants from abroad being accepted onto training courses

Schools Week approached DfE with our cost savings analysis, but they did not respond to a request for the information.

NEWS

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Scientists wanted to help DfE 'shape future of education'

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOTH

Scientists with expertise in artificial intelligence, sustainable school buildings and ed tech are being recruited to advise ministers and "shape the future of education".

The Department for Education is creating a new 12-strong science advisory council to help the department access "cutting-edge" scientific evidence, analytical approaches and expertise for "robust" decision making.

They want members to be from academia, industry and non-profit organisations with a research, science or analytical background, an advert stated.

The council will support Professor Russell Viner, DfE's chief scientific adviser, to provide ministers and senior officials with expert advice.

While the DfE has "long-established analytical expertise", it wants to widen its scope to "draw additionally on natural and social science disciplines".

DfE said the membership will reflect the need to



respond to its challenges such as "developments in AI and education technology, sustainable and secure school buildings and adapting to climate change, and continued physical and mental health challenges".

"This is an exciting opportunity for highly experienced members of the academic and non-governmental analytical community (mid-career and senior) to influence evidence-based policy and shape the future of education," it added.

Other expertise required includes behavioural science, computer science, maths and psychology.



Professor Russell Viner

Members must interact with government "transparently and openly", while acting in an "unbiased and independent manner".

In addition, they must have "excellent" communication skills to "command the confidence" of the scientific community, but also have "personal and political sensitivity".

DfE is looking for between 8 to 12 members, including a chairperson.

The two-year posts will be voluntary, but with reasonable expenses covered.

Applications close on May 27.

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MOVERS AND SHAKERS

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Carley Holliman****Deputy CEO, The Eden Academy Trust****Start date:** June 24**Current role:** Assistant director of education, Cambridgeshire County Council**Interesting fact:** Carley was in the riot episode of *Grange Hill* in 1992, which resulted in three days of her school summer holidays spent running up and down a disused building site.

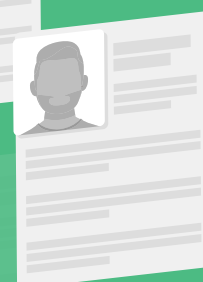
Movers & Shakers

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

**Corinne Kaur-Stevenson****National Procurement Manager, Oasis Community Learning****Start date:** February**Previous role:** Procurement manager, Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Trust**Interesting fact:** Corinne is a huge advocate of yoga and is a trained instructor. She practises every day to build strength, stay flexible and most importantly improve mindfulness.**Rebecca Waterson****Director of learning, E-ACT****Start date:** September**Current role:** Senior vice principal, Brooke Weston Academy**Interesting fact:** Rebecca has skydived over the Franz Josef Glacier in New Zealand, jumped off the Auckland Sky Tower and has also lived and worked in Singapore.**Kay Shepherd****Director of learning, E-ACT****Start date:** September**Current role:** Director of Leicestershire and Rutland Teaching School Hub**Interesting fact:** Kay is a trained ski instructor and also enjoys a Mars bar dipped in a cup of tea.**Alistair Crawford****Workforce development lead, The Eden Academy Trust****Start date:** April 15**Previous role:** Director of SEND and inclusion, St Martin's and St Andrew's Teaching Schools, Derby**Interesting fact:** As a junior, Alistair represented Wales in athletics. The 400, 200 and 4x100m were his main events (anything further than a lap of the track felt like a marathon!).Please let us know of any new faces leading your school, trust or education organisation by emailing news@schoolsweek.co.uk

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Profile

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'We stand together and can achieve amazing things'

Meet Rachel Younger, the first president of school leaders' union NAHT who hasn't been a headteacher

This weekend, Rachel Younger will take to the stage in front of hundreds of school leaders as the first president-elect in NAHT's 127-year history, who is not, and has never been, a headteacher.

Given the worsening financial storm in schools, perhaps it's apt for the union to be fronted by someone with first-hand experience of managing those overstretched budgets.

Younger, will be introduced as the incoming president at the union's annual conference in Wales today. As NAHT's most senior elected lay person, Younger will chair its national executive,

annual conference and AGM.

She faces an unenviable task: highlighting the myriad of challenges which are causing school staff to quit in droves, while also not presenting such a bleak view of school life that it deters others from joining.

"But you've got to keep raising the issues, because we're trying to make things better", says Younger, who is also the union's Blackpool branch secretary.

'We're good at making efficiencies'

NAHT, which currently has 49,000 members,

was founded in 1897 and became the National Association of Head Teachers, from which its name derives, in 1906.

For most of its history membership was restricted to headteachers, with assistant heads only admitted from 2000.

Younger believes there's still a "misconception" that NAHT only represents headteachers.

For the last seven years she's juggled her day job as business leader at St Nicholas Church of England Primary School, in Blackpool, with her NAHT roles.

She says being a school business leader has

Profile: Rachel Younger

given her “unique insight into the impact of over a decade of austerity, the funding cuts on schools and the tough decisions they must make every single day”.

Because most of a school's budget goes on staffing costs, that gets trimmed first when school leaders are expected to “make efficiencies”, as DfE calls it.

“People like me, that's our job... we're really good at making efficiencies,” Younger says. “But they only got so far. When you're talking about people's livelihoods, it's awful and it shouldn't have to happen.”

At her NAHT North West regional meetings, Younger hears more instances of staffing restructures linked to funding – most commonly of support assistants, but also senior leadership teams, which Younger gets involved with as a branch caseworker.

A recent survey by The Sutton Trust showed 32 per cent of school leaders reported making cuts to teaching staff, 69 per cent to teaching assistants and 46 per cent to support staff.

“Often it's the children with the highest needs that really suffer because [you lose] the people who give those children the support they need.”

The transformative power of education

Younger attributes her strong work ethic to her mum, who raised her and her older brother in Pudsey, West Yorkshire, while also undertaking a range of jobs and evening college courses.

Coming from a family of manual workers, Younger's mum was “determined to do something different”. After getting a degree and PGCE, she became a college English lecturer.

Younger describes her as the “key inspiring factor in my life, in terms of that transformative power of education”.

The best teacher Younger ever knew was her junior school headteacher Mr Mason, who “knew not just every child's name, but treated each child as special and imparted that sense of belonging”.

She reflects on how those relationships are less common these days with higher staff turnaround in schools, with increased reliance on supply agencies.



‘Schools are struggling to pay for what is absolutely essential’

Younger initially had her sights on becoming a doctor. But halfway through her biological science degree she realised “it wasn't for me” and moved back in with her mum, then living in Blackpool, to “regroup”.

She believes it's “really challenging as a teenager to decide what you want to do for the rest of your life”.

Her advice to her son these days is, “it doesn't matter what you do, as long as you do something – if it doesn't work out, try something else.”

Younger embarked on “character forming” work as a waitress at a pizza parlour, then at a more upmarket restaurant.

Younger's mum was then in a job training councillors, and Younger got a job with her at the counselling centre's office, running the website, as well as receptionist and office duties.

‘Doing a bit of everything’

By then she had a son and in 2003 moved into a role at his village primary school, Yealand, as an office administrator. She stayed four years at the 40-pupil school, and “absolutely loved” how it was “at the centre of that community”.

After persuading the headteacher to let her take a new qualification in 2007, the then fully-funded bursar development programme, she became business manager at Blackpool's Baines endowed Church of England Primary School.

Moving to a school with nearly 500 pupils taught her that “you can still retain a family feel in a large primary with a nurturing environment”.

Blackpool's high levels of deprivation meant the school had “challenges”, but held a vital role as a “safe place” for children.

It was attached to a Sure Start children's centre, which “brought families together who wouldn't otherwise have that safe space to meet”.

The loss of such centres means that “families are often quite disconnected in society... the only place they can come now for help is school.”

Younger took on the business manager role at St Nicholas in 2010, when it was expanding from a one to two form entry school.

She also became an NAHT branch official. When the union formed sector councils in 2013, she sat on its inaugural school business leader council, and became regional president in 2018.

Profile: Rachel Younger

Child poverty

Each incoming president nominates a partner charity. Younger chose Buttle UK, which supports young people in crisis because child poverty is an issue close to her heart.

She sees first-hand the cost-of-living crisis impact on school budgets, and hears of colleagues "helping with uniform costs, setting up food banks, in some cases delivering food parcels to families and routinely washing children's clothes".

A University of Bristol study found there are now more school-based foodbanks than regular ones.

Meanwhile, capital funding, which has shrunk to a "tiny amount...not enough to paper over the cracks in the wall, never mind fix the cracks", is also "keeping [school leaders] awake at night".

She praises them for being "good at dealing with crises", but it's "not right" that some are having to fundraise locally now for essential items.

Another concern is the high needs funding system being "absolutely in crisis".

There are "system changes that could be made". Younger's school is near the border with Lancashire, and many of its pupils live there rather than Blackpool. The two councils have "different formulas and application processes for how they distribute that high needs money, and different teams dealing with it".

The dichotomy means a child with the same needs in Blackpool would "probably get a different amount" than in Lancashire.

Younger would love to see the processes standardised nationally.

She would also love to see the myriad of school funding pots "streamlined" because "administratively it's far more complicated than it needs to be".

Ofsted

Frustration over the government's rejection of calls to scrap Ofsted single word judgements is also likely to hang over the upcoming NAHT conference.

Education unions are pinning their hopes on



'Families are often disconnected in society... the only place they can come now for help is school'

the outcome of Ofsted's "Big Listen" consultation to spark meaningful change.

"It's clear that single-word judgments are outdated, and we now need to see significant reform," says Younger.

At last year's conference, as anger mounted over the pressures of the inspection regime in the wake of headteacher Ruth Perry's death, her sister Professor Julia Waters called on school leaders who also work as inspectors to "hand in your badges".

Did the sector respond? The inspectorate said that 333 additional inspectors left between April last year and last month (one in seven). But it took on 427 new inspectors in that time.

Younger described what happened to Perry as "heartbreaking. The current Ofsted inspection regime casts a dark shadow over everyone working in the school community."

Last year's conference was also dominated by the threat of strike action. That was eventually

taken off the table, after the government made a 6.5 per cent pay rise offer and 85 per cent of NAHT's members voted to accept the deal.

But it highlighted to Younger the "power of the collective", which is why she got involved in NAHT in the first place.

"It's that feeling of strength and togetherness...we stand together and can achieve amazing things."

Younger's proudest career moment so far was finding out last year she'd been elected NAHT's vice president at a national executive meeting in Exeter, surrounded by "colleagues and lots of hugs".

Today, Younger is "excited and humbled" about becoming NAHT president, and "ready" for the challenge.

But after 21 years of working in schools, and all the challenges, she isn't in a hurry to give it up.

Schools are "genuinely amazing, special places to work. That's why we keep coming back year after year."

Opinion

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The sector's manifesto



DAME RACHEL
DE SOUZA

Children's Commissioner

Five youth-led ambitions to improve all childhoods

Dame Rachel de Souza sets out five education-specific policy priorities informed by the voices of more than one million children

When I took office as Children's Commissioner, I made it my mission to listen to children. The Big Ask gathered responses from more than 500,000 children about what is important to them. Now, The Big Ambition survey means my work is backed by more than one million children's voices. The Big Ambition sets out a vision for transforming childhood, which has come directly from them. Mostly, it is brimming with their practical, positive ideas and solutions, hopeful for change and confident that it can happen. However, some (including the 14,000 with a social worker) were consistently less positive.

Perhaps the most striking finding is that only one in five children (22 per cent) feels listened to by those who run the country. As a former headteacher and teacher, this is really frustrating.

That's my challenge to all politicians as we approach a general election: listen to what children are telling you they want, and act on it.

Here are five key education-focused areas from The Big Ambition to tackle urgently:

A brilliant education

Children deeply value their education. Sixty per cent say they enjoy school or college. However, too many miss out because they lack the support they need to engage and attend. That's why I want to see:

1. Schools and local authorities held to account for the outcomes of children who leave their school rolls;
2. Attendance mentors working across multi-academy trusts and local authorities providing whole-family support to remove barriers to attendance;
3. Alternative Provision as an outreach intervention, with schools remaining accountable for the children they move into these settings; and
4. A register of children not in school, so that we have a proper grip on where children are and stop any from missing out completely.

Better support for SEND

Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) were less likely to say they enjoy school or have access to good healthcare than children without SEND. We need a quicker pace of change for these children, who are spending too much of their childhoods waiting for support. I have recommended:

1. That no child should wait longer than one term for a local authority needs assessment,



“ Listen to what children are telling you and act on it

and that a reformed 'Child's Plan' should give them and their families clarity and confidence in the support they receive;

2. Support services delivered on school sites;
3. Statutory SEND support, with additional funding sitting separately from a school's high-needs budget; and
4. Ongoing training in supporting SEND throughout teachers' careers.

Healthy minds and bodies

Most children (84 per cent) agree they can access good healthcare when they need it. However, older children answered health and wellbeing questions more negatively. That's why I've recommended:

1. A school nurse in every school working hand-in-hand with youth workers, paediatricians and other healthcare professionals;
2. New restrictions on vapes so they are not intentionally marketed to children;
3. Mental health services colocated in every school so that help is available earlier; and
4. Schools are empowered to tackle and discuss emerging topics such as misogyny or sexual harassment.

Tackling child poverty

Children are becoming increasingly aware of and affected by their parents' stresses, especially related to work and the cost of living. The six percent of children who told me they were not happy with their family life were nine times more likely to be unhappy with their life overall. That's why I want to see:

1. All eligible children auto-enrolled in free school meals; and
2. Breakfast clubs offered at every school, free of charge to parents.

Successful careers and life skills

Children are ambitious and are vocal about the kinds of skills they feel they are missing; just 65 percent of respondents agree children know about good jobs for when they're older. The education system needs to be better at preparing them for adulthood. That's why I've recommended:

1. High-quality PSHE to include life skills such as financial education, economic wellbeing and career planning;
2. Ofsted should hold schools to account for the quality of their PSHE lessons; and
3. High-quality careers advice for every child.

Read the full detail of these recommendations and more [here](#)

Opinion

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TIM
LEUNIG

Director, Public First

Let's cancel bank holidays and... bank those holidays

We could rationalise the school terms and improve conditions for everyone in school if we did away with these anachronistic long weekends, says Tim Leunig

Who doesn't like a day off? That is why there are regular campaigns for more bank holidays. What's not to like, especially if the weather is good? (Although as I write, the forecast for this year's May Day is rain pretty much everywhere).

Bank holidays are, however, increasingly anomalous. For sure, the banks are closed - but who visits a bank these days? The vast majority of shops will be open. Trains and buses will run. Leisure facilities will be open.

Schools, on the other hand, will close. I think that is unhelpful. In addition to INSET days, which tend to fall on a Monday, it means pupils who have science on a Monday miss science multiple times throughout the year. Those who have French, miss French, and so on. That is disruptive.

Indeed, when I was an undergraduate my university ignored bank holidays. A Monday in term was a Monday in term. This was much easier than trying to

reschedule lectures to make up for missed teaching.

I would like to see most bank holidays abolished. England and Wales have eight each year, Scotland nine, and Northern Ireland ten. I would keep only Christmas Day, Boxing Day, and New Year's Day. Most people want these days off.

If we did that, then for most people we could raise the statutory holiday allowance from four to five weeks a year. If people want to take Good Friday, Easter Monday, two Mondays in May and one in August they could. But if they would rather take a week in September, they could do that instead.

Teachers, of course, don't choose when they work. Only the first May bank holiday falls in term. The rest are either in holidays or in the summer half-term. Abolishing bank holidays would not give teachers any more flexibility. But it would give schools an opportunity to sort out term dates.

Schools would no longer have to vary the length of spring and summer terms according to when Easter falls. You will find me in church every Sunday, but we are now a post-Christian nation. It is absurd that schools have to arrange their terms around my faith,



“ We are now a post-Christian nation

one shared only by a small and shrinking minority.

This year, spring term is longer than summer term; next year it will be the other way round. We can all agree that changing the length of terms each year is plain silly. The length of the spring and summer terms should be the same each year, and probably the same length as each other. The spring holiday could fall at the same time each year, irrespective of when Easter falls. Teachers would then know what they are supposed to cover each term.

Similarly, summer half-term would not have to be situated according to the second May bank holiday. It too could be decided sensibly, and these changes would make school terms more rational.

The biggest problem is the autumn term. This term is the longest, typically more than three-and-a-half months. That is just too long. This is a particular issue for the youngest children, who are exhausted by Christmas. That is

not helpful in getting them to like school, or for the amount that they learn.

So as well as changing spring and summer term dates, I want to change the autumn term as well. We know that summer holiday learning loss is real - particularly for children from poorer families. Autumn term should begin four days earlier. Add in the saved second May bank holiday, and I have a week of extra holiday - enough to follow private schools in having a two-week autumn break.

Better still, I propose two separate week-long autumn term breaks - one earlier in term, one later. Dividing the long autumn term into three makes sense to me: less exhaustion, less learning loss.

Shorter and more regular terms and no random Mondays off school seems like a better way to run things. Who's with me?

Tim Leunig will be next term with the next instalment of his termly policy column

Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
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JOHN BARNEBY
CEO, Oasis Community Learning

Trusts have an ethical duty to shape inclusive local systems

In the face of so many challenges, academy trusts must embrace collaboration over competition to deliver for communities, says John Barneby

Taking part in the National Institute of Teaching's new MAT CEOs immersion programme this week, I was reminded of the importance of collaboration in driving improvement for our schools and communities. Sadly, that spirit of collaboration is not yet embedded across our system, though the ingredients are all there in the trust quality descriptors to set us on that path.

We face unprecedented challenges, among them the long tail of Covid, recruitment and SEND crises and the financial implications of reductions in student numbers.

It's clear to me we can't wait for government to fix these things. As our sector matures, we need to keep defining systems leadership and organisational strength and resilience in a way that enables us to solve them ourselves.

A quick scan of academy trust websites shows that, though we may use different words and diverse means of achieving it, we all have a broadly similar vision for education. Collectively, we should use that

common purpose as a platform to solve the challenges we face.

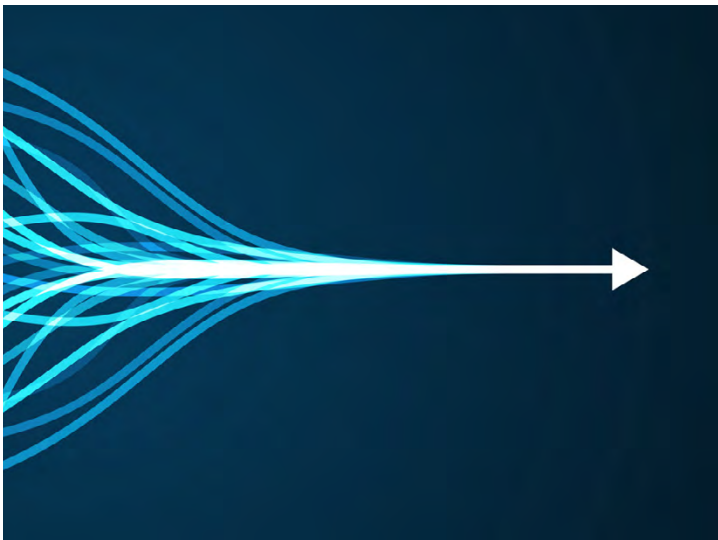
I was recently told the story of two MATs – one large and national, the other small and local – taking on two neighbouring schools in the same catchment area. Both schools were struggling, serving communities with high levels of disadvantage and SEND.

The large national MAT had HR teams, lawyers, education directors, polished presentations and videos for parents. The local MAT had a CEO and a person from HR. In other words, the large MAT had all of the power, not least because of higher reserves and the ability to pay more staff.

As a result, teachers and leaders left the smaller MAT and parents chose the large MAT's school. The school in the small MAT rapidly found itself under capacity and taking on a disproportionate level of disadvantaged children, managed moves and children with SEND to balance its books.

For all the greatness of the large MAT, it came at the cost of the local education system.

Repeated nationally, the consequences are clearly not an equitable education system. We must ensure that collaboration, justice and fairness are at the centre of our decision making. Things are tough, but we must resist the temptation



“ We must resist the temptation to retreat inwards

to retreat inwards and implement isolationist policies. Ultimately, this risks long-term damage not only to communities, but to our own organisations.

We need to prioritise the development of the local education system and communities beyond the success of our trusts. We need to share the failure of any school in the system and work collaboratively to support one another.

At Oasis, our mission is to deliver exceptional education at the heart of the community. Our vision is not for a large national MAT, but for inclusive and holistic education to be a key lever in ensuring everyone thrives. I believe we will achieve this by ensuring that the decisions we make are first and foremost right for the communities we serve.

Recruitment is a great example of where an ethical systems leadership approach is needed. There is not a conversation in school which doesn't lead back to the issue of people. Working alone, the temptation is for bigger MATs to offer pay

and incentives that smaller MATs and local authority schools can't compete with – making other peoples' situation worse in pursuit of improving our own.

While we have to be realistic and competitive, we need to act together as an education system and in a way which does not knowingly damage others.

The National Institute of Teaching shows what is possible when 'competitors' come together for the greater good, with the next generation of teachers and leaders being trained and supported by the sector and for the sector.

As I start off in the role of CEO at Oasis, I am committed to encouraging a spirit of local collaboration between MATs, the DfE and local authorities, so that we all see our communities as our collective responsibilities.

That is what the trust quality descriptors explicitly encourage us to do, and rightly so. Because it is how we will create the education system we want, and our communities need.

Opinion

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DR BETH
HARDIE

Affiliated researcher,
Centre for Analytic
Criminology, University
of Cambridge

CHARLES
DREW

Headteacher,
The Commonweal
School



Beyond behaviour: Mapping a route to moral betterment

A new programme aims to navigate schools out of the dead-end behaviour debate and towards a holistic approach to pro-social attitudes

The age-old debate about behaviour management is a key battlefield in the polarised culture war waged across professional publications, school staffrooms and the media. On one side are those who espouse the central importance of sanctions; on the other, those who promote personal development and a strong school ethos. Now, a new and growing evidence base suggests that the latter are right to be sceptical of 'draconian' punishment regimes and an over-reliance on controls.

Cutting-edge research evidence pioneered by the Centre for Analytic Criminology at the University of Cambridge shows that pro-social and rule-following behaviour is driven primarily by the strong moral rules of individuals. Further, it shows that these are developed and adhered to in strong moral contexts.

Moreover, related research in schools is increasingly showing that controls like supervision, sanctions and deterrents are only conditionally relevant. They are relegated to a failsafe in situations when individuals are forced to deliberate about their actions.

But such deliberation only occurs following conflict between actors'

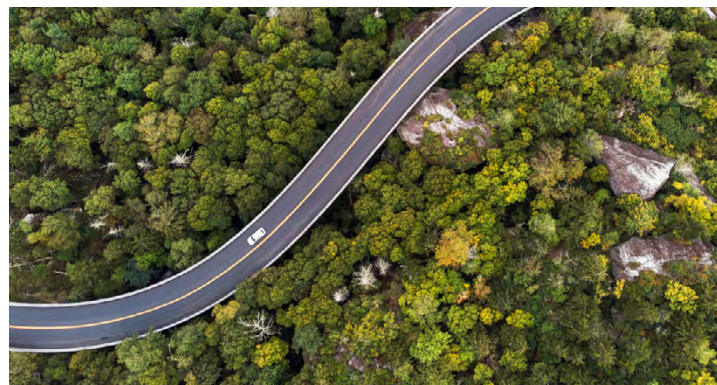
own moral rules and those of their immediate context, ie. when the moral rules of either the individual or the school context (such as classrooms, corridors and the people in them) are weak.

Thus, when students with strong pro-social values are in school settings that are also pro-social, sanctions and deterrents are simply not relevant to their behaviour.

This internationally growing evidence base is counter to the majority of prior academic and pedagogical approaches that identify controls to be the most fundamental contributor to rule-following. Instead, research findings strongly suggest that effective behaviour management should be built on a comprehensive strategy for personal moral development within a strong moral context.

Importantly, this new evidence base is grounded in theory that provides strong and specific recommendations, not just for school behaviour policies, but also for guidance about school moral climate and targeted morality-strengthening interventions.

Now, through the collaboration of researchers and practitioners, this theory and evidence base is being translated into a wide-ranging programme of changes to policy and practice that can be adopted by individual schools under the guidance of those who have developed it.



“Morality is inseparable from behaviour management

The overall programme is called SATNAV, which consists of components that target individuals (SATNAV: Compass) and various, long-term and sustainable school-wide changes (SATNAV: Global).

Some students will at times need a system of supervision, rewards and sanctions to ensure good behaviour. The SATNAV programme aims to complement these systems by supporting schools to develop a more holistic approach to influencing young people's behavioural outcomes. Its aim is to positively affect their long-term development and the in-the-moment processes leading to their choices and actions.

SATNAV is founded on three fundamental principles. First, that schools can and should influence both short-term behavioural and long-term developmental outcomes. Second, that 'good behaviour' means both the absence of disruptive behaviour and also positive engagement with learning and personal development. And third, that education is about preparing young people to show this good behaviour not only at school, but outside of it and beyond into adulthood.

Under the programme, the personal development of students within an inclusive, pro-social

school climate is inseparable from behaviour management. In contrast to reactive and punitive controls in schools, the SATNAV programme aims to support schools to develop empowered young people who will continue to make the right behavioural choices after 3pm each day, and also post-16 when we are not there to supervise them.

Affecting this change is about guidance more than it is about control. Importantly, such guidance must not just be a reaction to poor behaviour when it arises. It also needs to be reflected through the school's curriculum and culture. Nor must such guidance be delivered only to individuals who transgress the rules. It is also delivered to the whole community through explicit teaching and learning about the moral basis of codes of behaviour.

The SATNAV programme is now being trialled in three English schools including The Commonweal School, which has been instrumental in its development. Academic researchers are evaluating the impact of the various changes, and we look forward to reporting back on our progress.

To find out more or to trial SATNAV, or SATNAV Compass, contact [Dr Beth Hardie](#) or [Dr Neema Trivedi-Bateman](#)

Solutions

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RAMA VENCHARD

Chair, London South East
Academies Trust

How to ensure trustees make informed decisions on growth

Trusts' growth plans should be underpinned by a set of principles that streamline decision-making and ensure trustees can make the right calls, says Rama Venchard

With the widespread financial challenges facing schools and the benefits that come from being part of a bigger network, we are seeing rapid growth within many Multi-Academy Trusts across the country.

A trust's (or school's) board plays an intrinsic role in the organisation's strategic plan, and securing the support of trustees is fundamental to effective expansion.

As chair of London South East Academies Trust (LSEAT), which is currently on its own growth journey, it is my role to ensure our board has all the information it needs to make the right decisions.

But how can you get trustees on side, while ensuring that adequate challenge and consideration are provided?

To that end we have developed a set of growth, strategic and design principles in partnership with the trust's executive team. In the same way as commercial enterprises operate, these principles provide a framework that enables a trust and its board to effectively assess whether a school would be a sustainable and beneficial fit.

Principles for growth

Growth principles look at the type of provision being offered and how it would align with our existing schools.

For example, we are currently growing our mainstream primary hub as well as a specialist hub in Surrey. Would the proposed school fit with either of these (targeted growth)? Or, are we looking at diversifying our offer further? If the latter, then would the proposed school be able to play a role in leading a new hub? Alternatively, do we have a gap in our provision that a proposed school could help fill?

Setting out these growth categories ensures trustees can quickly understand the context of the opportunities being put forward, reflecting the strategic process and thorough consideration that a leadership team will have undertaken to reach this point.

Strategic fit

These wide-ranging criteria look at where the proposed school is located, its financial performance, the condition of its estate, right through to whether it shares our trust's values, culture and ethos. We also consider its Ofsted outcomes, its relationships with the local authority and local community and how it is governed.

These aspects will paint a clear picture for trustees of the capacity,



“ Lack of capacity can lead to dramatic de-stabilisation

financial and staffing resources that may be needed going forward – and the challenges that may characterise any transfer.

Design for success

Awareness of these challenges leads us onto the design principles, and consideration of risks.

Trusts grow at different rates. Grow too quickly, without the supporting infrastructure in place, and the trust has a high risk of failing. But, it's not just about the pace of growth. Taking a failing school through an improvement process requires extensive resources from other parts of the trust.

We take a systems leadership approach, drawing on outstanding leadership and staff expertise within our network of schools. But if there isn't enough capacity to support this, it can lead to the dramatic de-stabilisation of our other schools. This is something we couldn't and wouldn't risk.

Therefore, our design principles focus on ensuring that we only grow when we have the capacity and resources to do so, understanding

and accepting all the associated risks. This includes ensuring we have sufficient reserves to address future challenges and invest in infrastructure ahead of growth where possible.

Measured growth

By having such principles in place, both the executive team and its board can measure growth options against a consistent framework. Not only does this enable trustees to make informed decisions, it provides a clear understanding of the opportunities and risks from the outset, giving them agency to ask the right questions and fully consider any risks.

Setting out clear goals aligned with an agreed set of criteria is central to our trust's approach to growth. It keeps our governance focused on ensuring the trust is fit for purpose, achieving its strategic aims, and doing so sustainably.

A combination of growth, strategic and design principles enables us to ensure the education we provide is the best it can possibly be across all our settings, established and new.

THE CONVERSATION

LISTENING IN ON THE DIGITAL STAFFROOM



Frances Akinde
SEND adviser and
neurodiversity
champion

My work for a local authority as an inspector and advisor for SEND requires adherence to certain regulations during pre-election periods. Basically, we are not allowed to engage in anything political.

Having ADHD, I'm prone to blurting things out without thinking of the consequences and saying things that others may not dare to. So self-imposed silence is sometimes the safest way to ensure I follow the rules.

For that reason, I've stayed away from social media, blogs and podcasts that might have tempted me into taking a partisan stance. Thankfully for me, the local elections concluded yesterday, so I'm back to sharing my opinion.

THE SINCERITY GAP

It's a shame that some of our politicians don't think as deeply about their behaviour.

I am not a fan of any party in particular, so I'm amused by the number of interest groups jostling to ensure their issues make it into the manifestos that are evidently being drawn up as we speak. And what I've noticed over the past year is an increase in MPs from all corners showing support for neurodivergent conditions and inclusive education.

I fully support true public servants who tirelessly advocate for change for the good of the people they serve without pushing

the agenda for themselves. I have personally been invited to participate in all-party parliamentary groups, that demonstrate all parties can work together for a common cause. They are an important part of our democracy.

I also understand the interplay between advocacy, legislation and representation is delicate. However, call me sceptical, but I am concerned about MPs talking about potentially life-changing legislation as 'their bill' and gaining publicity for this.

Their endorsement does not necessarily equal positive support for the cause, as the politicians leading this are not always the best role models for our children. The neurodivergent community and their allies are seeking genuine progress in this area, so I worry about the authenticity of political endorsements that could actually be led by self-serving agendas.

In particular this week, I've had to hold back raging at a particular one-time minister for skills who many hold responsible for a higher level of deaths during the pandemic - deaths that disproportionately impacted BAME communities.

As part of his ongoing journey to rehabilitate his political career after breaking the pandemic rules he was responsible for imposing, the same Matt Hancock is cheerfully promoting his bill for universal dyslexia screening.



Thankfully, I found some solace for my pent-up rage in leading neurodiversity campaigner Chris Packham's response to Hancock on the BBC's flagship Sunday morning politics show. I'm glad I wasn't the only one to see through the naked self-promotion.

THE OTHER PAY GAP



As we move inexorably from local to national elections, I'm interested in what educational issues do manage to gain attention.

This week, the conversation has rightly focused on education's gender pay gap, but little is being reported on the ethnicity pay gap campaign founded by Dianne Greyson and backed by the NASUWT, who have published a report on the matter.

It was, however, an important point at the TUC's #BlackWorkersConference24 last weekend, which ran under the theme 'Here to stay, here to fight'. As usual, the NASUWT and NEU were out in force. Last time I attended, I was with the only member of the then-35,000-strong NAHT at the event. This year, there were eight (out of 49,000).

A motion was put forward – and passed – calling for mandatory reporting of the ethnicity pay gap. It will now be considered at the main conference in September.

This is important as UKME educators are less likely to have permanent contracts and therefore less likely to have opportunities to climb the professional ladder. It's a persistent issue NFER flagged two years ago in a seminal report with Ambition Institute and Teach First.

So I'll be watching to see which schools and trusts truly commit to change and which continue with performative actions.

And I'll also be looking out for politicians who are sincere in their efforts to represent us – though I expect I'll need a powerful lens to spot any.

Click the links to access the blogs and podcasts



The Knowledge

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



How can we close the political engagement gap?

Bryony Hoskins, Chair of comparative social science, University of Roehampton

With the local elections this week and a national election this year, turnout will once again become a focus of media attention. A new study by UCL's Professor Jan Germen Janmaat and I funded by the Nuffield Foundation, sheds light on inequalities in political engagement and schools' role in tackling them.

The study finds that university-educated parents adopt behaviours that lead their children to become significantly more politically engaged between the ages 10 to 16 than their peers. And because this age period is critical in developing future political behaviour, the parental behaviour of those with degrees during these years gives their children disproportionate electoral influence as a group as they get older.

Intriguingly, there are no social differences in political interest at age 10, but by the time adolescents reach age 16, those with university-educated parents show a 10 per cent-higher level of political interest than those with less well-educated parents.

In other words, early adolescence is a crucial stage for the emergence of social differences in political engagement, and parental access to education is a determining factor in the development of democratic knowledge, habits and skills in the next generation.

As figure 1 shows, there is a linear correlation between the amount of parental education and the level of young people's political engagement.

Addressing this inequality in schools could well be key to boosting turnout at elections where there are pronounced differences in turnout between social groups. In 2019, for example, electoral turnout was 43 per cent for voters aged 18 to 34 from semi-skilled and unskilled occupations as opposed to 59 per cent from young adults in managerial and professional classes.

Analysis of data from two national longitudinal surveys – the Citizenship Education longitudinal study and the Understanding Society youth survey – show why this is happening. University-educated parents ensure their children are becoming politically engaged through trips to museums and art galleries, their influence on friendship groups and, crucially, their choice of school.

School choice typically leads to educated parents selecting settings where other more educated parents' children will attend and which undertake more activities in which young people learn to politically engage: more discussion in class, more active student voice activities and student councils.

In addition, university-educated parents raise their children to feel confident in taking part in political discussions, whatever the setting: the classroom, the school's debating club or mock political events. Through participating and receiving positive feedback from their engagement in these activities these children develop their

Figure.1

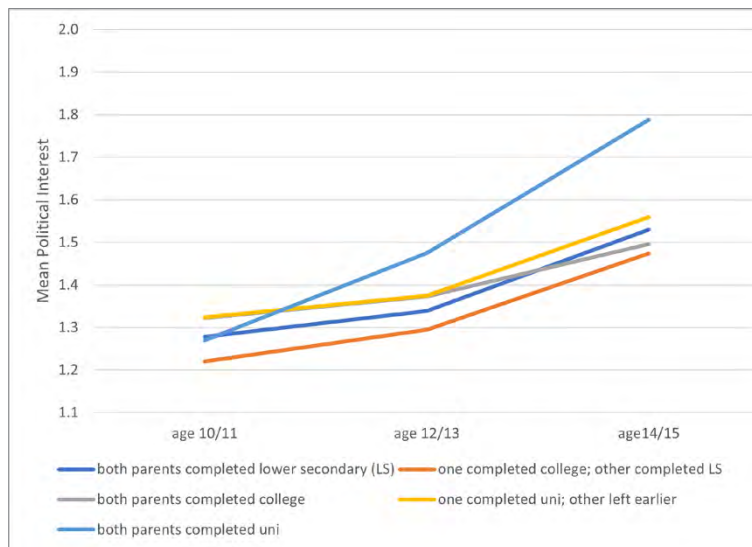


Figure 1. The development of political interest by parental education level.
(Source: Understanding Society youth survey)

levels of political interest even further.

Our research shows that schools unintentionally participate in the process of reproducing these social inequalities. Children from higher-educated families tend to have more opportunities to become politically-engaged citizens than children from parents without degrees.

Our research includes recommendations that could help to reduce social inequalities in political engagement.

These include the need for government to provide more support and resources to schools with more deprived student intakes, so that these schools can organise the kinds of school trips to cultural and other venues that promote democratic engagement. Such support should also encourage them to organise more activities, which lead to political interest.

As to schools, it is crucial that when organising such civic engagement activities, they ensure fair access to them. As with work experience, the subject of last week's column in these pages, it is too late to notice a gap when UCAS applications come around.

And there is plenty to do in the classroom too. To that end, government should prioritise and support teacher training on methods for inclusive citizenship education to support wider participation in politically engaging activities.

A greater focus on oracy is a useful first step in rethinking the kinds of classroom practices that value and promote young people's voices. But, if we are to reverse an intergenerational trend it is necessary to consider which voices are being heard in the classroom and how to redress this balance. There is a lot more to be done.

Read the full open-access study [here](#)

Week in

Westminster

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

FRIDAY

If the Education and Skills Funding Agency fancies a rebrand, it has to look no further than its chief executive for a new name.

David Withey made the National Network of Special Schools audience chuckle when he said: "I'm the chief executive of what I believe you are now referring to as the ES - F-word - agency."

He was welcomed on stage to a giant word cloud where school business professionals declared FUNDING as their main challenge.

"It is clearly a timely appearance given what I see in front of me," Withey said.

[HEAD] MONDAY:

From reading the minutes of the national attendance alliance, you'd be mistaken for thinking that all is rosy and leaders aren't at their wits' end trying to get kids in school.

The minutes for a meeting held in March, published today, appear to show that nothing new was talked about in how to help schools cut absence rates.

However, there was lots of backslapping. Four of the members thanked one of the others for their work so far, with education secretary Gillian Keegan "expressing her gratitude" to others on three other occasions!

PS: Perhaps we are being a bit too cynical. A report published a few days later by the OECD highlighted England for having a "comprehensive strategy to fight school absences".

Despite quitting as skills minister last month, Robert Halfon was back on the apprenticeships beat – bigging up to his replacement Luke Hall the achievements over the past year at education questions.

"Is it not the case that apprenticeship achievements have gone up by 22% over the past year, that over 90% of apprentices who complete their apprenticeship get good jobs or good skills, and that starts are going up, too? ... It is this side of the House that is building an apprenticeship and skills nation."

So much for a question...

TUESDAY

We're all keen to know the key lessons learnt from the government's 'delivering better value' scheme to help councils get a grip on their SEND provision.

However, the 'findings from phase one' were just a load of Latin garbage, with the standard web development placeholder phrase of 'loerm ipsum dolor sit amet'.

Let's hope the actual version has a bit more to offer...

If Sir Hamid Patel, chief executive of the Star Academies trust, ever wants to leave the profession, we reckon he'd make a fine storyteller.

As he opened the Confederation of School Trusts' directors of improvement conference in Birmingham, Patel quipped: "You heard all the intelligent speakers, all the colleagues with the evidence – now I've got a few stories to

tell you. What's the relevance? It just needs to be a good story and then we can connect it [to school improvement]".

Over the following 30 minutes, he talked of mountaineers who scaled the Peruvian Andes, Bill Shankly's Liverpool side, the Potemkin village and Sir Dave Brailsford's cycling achievements. Patel also planned to mention David and Goliath, but he ran out of time.

WEDNESDAY

The big talk in the morning of the Schools and Academies Show in London was the no show of education secretary Gillian Keegan.

Trailed as the headliner to open the show, her name was scrubbed off the agenda on Tuesday afternoon.

Coincidentally, it was just a few hours after WiW asked the department to confirm Keegz was going, but the DfE was none the wiser.

What we don't know is if she was actually ever supposed to attend, or just got cold feet!





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