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## PAY AND CURRICULUM FREEDOM REFORMS WON'T AFFECT US, SAY MOST CEOS

- Bosses most likely to say key policies would not affect them
- Survey 'puts to bed idea that entire MAT sector opposed'
- But few leaders are positive, with QTS particular concern

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

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SCHOOLS  
WEEK

## Meet the news team

**John Dickens**  
EDITOR@JOHNDICKENSSW  
JOHN.DICKENS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Freddie Whittaker**  
DEPUTY EDITOR@FCDWHITTAKER  
FREDDIE.WHITTAKER@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Samantha Booth**  
CHIEF REPORTER@SAMANTHAJBOTH  
SAMANTHA.BOOTH@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Lydia Chantler-Hicks**  
SENIOR REPORTER@LYDIACHSW  
LYDIA.CHANTLER-HICKS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Jack Dyson**  
SENIOR REPORTER@JACKYDYS  
JACK.DYSON@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Rhi Storer**  
REPORTER@RHISTORERWRITES  
RHI.STORER@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Rosa Furneaux**  
INVESTIGATIVE  
REPORTER@ROSAFURNEAUX  
ROSA.FURNEAUX@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**JL Dutaut**  
COMMISSIONING  
EDITOR@DUTAUT  
JEAN-LOUISDUTAUT@EDUCATIONSCAPE.COM**Nicky Phillips**  
HEAD DESIGNER@GELVETICA  
NICKY.PHILLIPS@FEWEEK.CO.UK

## THE TEAM

Shane Mann: Chief Executive | Senior Designer: Simon Kay | Classifieds Manager: Clare Halliday | Operations and Finance Director: Victoria Boyle | Event Manager: Frances Ogefero Dell | Senior Administrator: Evie Hayes | Finance Assistant and PA to CEO: Zoe Tuffin | Office Administrator: Zoe Belcher | Sales Administrator: Tyler Palmer

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Katharine Birbalsingh: "They're going to destroy our schools".

That was a headline in the New Statesman this week. There have been many other similarly explosive claims about Labour's plans to revoke academy reforms.

The fallout is, according to one report this week, even putting Bridget Phillipson at risk of being reshuffled.

Schools Week readers will know there are legitimate concerns about the schools bill. We've covered many of them.

We heard another this week over plans to roll out breakfast clubs in all primary schools.

The government is trialling the reforms. But we've spoken to heads who have already turned down invitations to take part, saying the funding won't cover costs.

This is potentially hugely problematic for the national roll-out. Schools should not be left to shoulder another new funding pressure. Hopefully this is

something Labour can iron out in the trial.

But, on the schools bill more generally, those that shout the loudest do tend to get the headlines.

So Schools Week wanted to find out what other trusts think about Labour's plans.

We commissioned Edurio to survey its trust leaders to hear their thoughts.

The findings are nuanced. But they show when asked about individual key schools bill academy policies, the most likely response is that leaders won't be affected.

However, the fact so few leaders were positive about their academy reforms – and many are negative – is worrying. There is particular concern too over unqualified teacher freedom reforms.

But the survey does provide some additional and important context to the ongoing debate. Not everyone agrees with Birbalsingh.

As we saw this week, there are always two sides to every story.

## Most read online this week:



**1** [Academy trust central teams gobble up £200m](#)

**2** ['Lower your tone': The DfE's account of THAT Birbalsingh meeting](#)

**3** [It's high time leaders held DfE to account for workload](#)

**4** [Trusts on verge of going bust, accountancy report claims](#)

**5** [Some mental health schemes 'increased emotional difficulties', finds landmark trial](#)

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C/O RUNWAY EAST, THE HICKMAN,  
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'Lower your tone': DfE's account of Birbalsingh meeting. See page 8



## NEWS

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# Pay and curriculum freedom reforms won't affect us, say most CEOs

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

Most trust CEOs say reforms that strip away academy freedoms on pay and curriculum would have no impact on their ability to run and improve schools.

Some say the findings, from a survey of 120 trust bosses running around 1,000 schools, challenge the narrative that Labour's reforms are opposed by all academies.

However, the survey did find trust leaders were particularly worried about changes that all new teachers must be qualified, and few said the changes would actually have a positive impact.

## 'Critics don't speak for everyone'

But Baroness Longfield, the former children's commissioner who chairs the Centre for Young Lives think-tank, said the findings "put to bed the idea that the entire MAT sector is opposed to the proposals in this important bill."

"It is a good reminder that the most strident critics are often not speaking for everyone."

The poll, conducted by Edurio for Schools Week, asked leaders for their views on whether the schools bill changes will impact their work.

Questions related to proposals to take away academy freedoms on curriculum, pay and employing unqualified teachers. A fourth question was on Labour's plans to introduce new trust compliance orders.

When asked about forcing academies to follow a national pay "floor, but no ceiling", 79 per cent said "it would not affect our work".

Meanwhile, almost 70 per cent of chief executives think the implementation of the national curriculum in all academies will have no impact on their work.

More than half gave the same response to new laws handing the secretary of state wide-



## 'The most strident critics are often not speaking for everyone'

ranging powers to issue academy compliance orders.

Under the changes, education secretary Bridget Phillipson would be able to give trusts whatever "directions" she "considers appropriate".

Responding trusts represented a range of sizes. Just over half had fewer than 10 schools, a third had between 10 and 19 and 13 per cent had 20-plus schools.

"A lot of loud voices have been campaigning, but the fact of the matter is what the CEOs have said here – these things will not have a big impact," said former Association of School and College Leaders general secretary Brian Lightman.

But former national schools commissioner Sir David Carter said: "Shouldn't a government policy help leaders to improve their schools, not create a sense of relief that the policy won't get in their way?"

positive impact.

For curriculum changes, just two per cent of surveyed leader said changes would be positive, compared to 17 per cent saying they would have a negative impact. However, another 10 per cent said they would be positive with "revisions made".

Of those who expressed concern over the policy, some worried it would limit their "flexibility to adapt the curriculum to local contexts and student needs, stifling innovation", according to Edurio.

Confederation of School Trusts CEO Leora Cruddas said the government has "not provided any evidence that the current freedoms cause any harm".

But she said that removing freedoms "risks doing so for many schools and the children they serve".

## ... and concern over QTS reforms

Trust leaders were most concerned about proposals for all new teachers to be qualified.

While just over two-fifths did not expect to be affected by requirements, 39 per cent said they would be negatively impacted.

One CEO told the pollsters they would "have difficulty filling all vacancies without

## But few say changes positive ...

And for each of the four policies – leaders were actually more likely to say the changes would have a negative than wholly



Baroness Longfield



Brian Lightman



## NEWS

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unqualified teachers” as finding those “who want to work in the SEND world... is very challenging”.

Another stressed that their trust appoints “graduates as unqualified teachers” when they cannot recruit anyone with qualified teacher status. The graduates usually gain qualifications over the following two years.

If the legislation is implemented, this would “cut off an important alternative when recruitment has proven impossible. The current recruitment (and retention) crisis has left us with little other choice.”

And Jonathan Simons, partner at Public First consultants, said the findings point to the schools bill actually having a “much greater impact on the academy sector [than] one might expect.

“It shows academy freedoms are more widely used than commonly thought.”

#### ‘Policymakers need to listen to leaders’

Ernest Jenavs, CEO of Edurio, which runs school surveys, added the findings “allow us to build a deeper understanding of how the planned policy changes might influence the sector responsible for educating the majority of pupils across England.

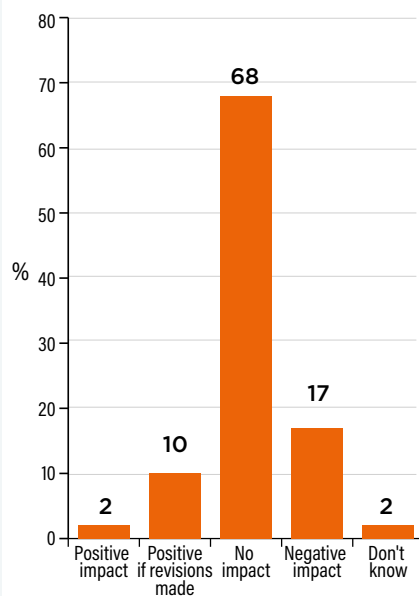
“More importantly, trust leaders have shared a wide range of considerations that policymakers should consider in the implementation of the legislation to ensure improved outcomes and fewer unintended consequences.”

Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson said: “I know that academy CEOs, and school leaders across the board, want the same thing government does: for every child, wherever they grow up and go to school, to receive a brilliant education.”

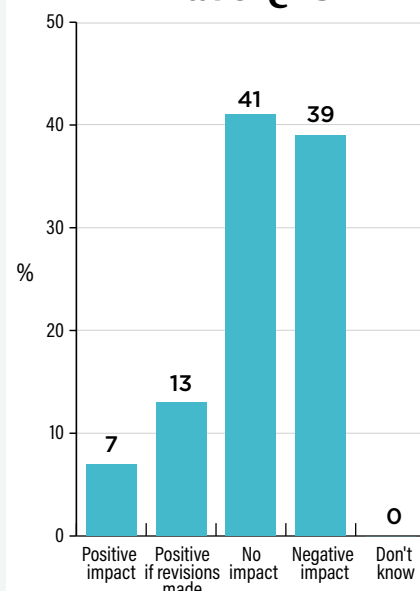
**Correction:** We removed an incorrect calculation from the original piece that 60 per cent of CEOs overall said the changes would have no impact. The findings provided were solely for individual policies, and the story now fully reflects that.

## CEOs (mostly) unaffected by academy reforms

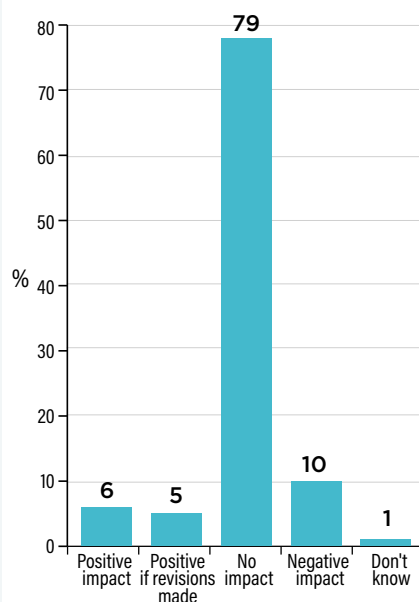
### National curriculum in all trust schools



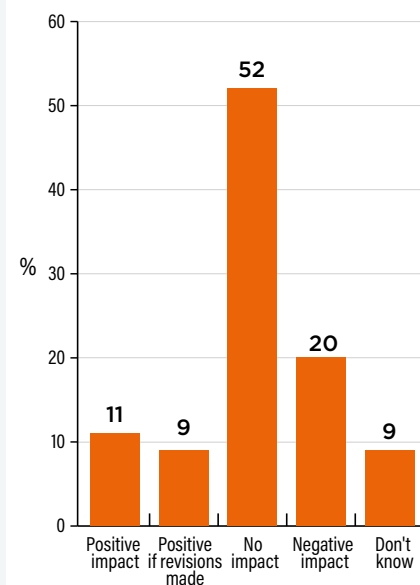
### New teachers must have QTS



### Setting a pay floor



### Direction orders for breaches



Source:Edurio

SCHOOLS WEEK

## Two-thirds of CEOs say Ofsted's reform are damaging

Sixty-five per cent of trust CEOs think Ofsted's school report cards and new five-point grading system across 11 areas will negatively affect the sector.

More than half of chief executives also warned that the inspectorate's planned changes will have a detrimental impact on their academies.

The reforms – which will also increase monitoring of under-performing schools and end ungraded visits – were announced in a consultation last week.

## NEWS

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# 'We can't run at a loss': Heads snub flagship breakfast clubs

RHI STORER

@RHISTORERWRITES

EXCLUSIVE

Primary schools invited to trial Labour's flagship free breakfast clubs have pulled out or are having to take a financial hit after being told that the basic funding rate is just 60p per pupil.

Up to 750 primary schools will be funded as part of an early adopter scheme to roll out free breakfasts for all pupils from April.

The government has set aside £315 million for the full roll-out. But impact assessment documents for the schools bill state that "exact are costs being finalised and agreed", and suggest that any extra "costs will then fall to schools".

Heads involved in the pilot scheme are already saying that funding does not cover costs.

## 'We just can't afford it'

Paul Bertram, a headteacher at Buxworth Primary School, says his school currently charges £2.75 for its own hour-long breakfast club with a sports teacher on site, with 30 pupils attending on average.

He told Schools Week he had to pull out of the trial because it would leave him with a £9,000 shortfall.

"For 30 children, with all your staff, your food and the cost of the premises, it's not a lot," he said of the government allowance.

Funding documents for the trial, seen by Schools Week, show schools will get a one-off £500 set-up payment to cover things like equipment and materials. They will also get a lump sum of £1,099 to cover "start-up staffing costs" for the summer term.

An arrears payment will then be made later this year based on the number of pupils taking part.

The basic rate is just 60p per pupil, per day. However, an additional 78p per pupil per day will be added based on the proportion of free school meal pupils at the school.

Per pupil payments for special schools are £3.23.

An FAQ sent to schools by the



## 'We're not entirely sure what the government intends the scheme to achieve'

government states they are "confident that the funding rate will enable schools to meet the minimum expectations" of a 30-minute breakfast club "based on existing provision operating in schools".

But Bertram said: "We discussed it as a governing body and we just couldn't afford to run at a loss. If this is the best they can offer, they are going to struggle with putting the policy nationally across the whole of the country."

Another CEO said 15 of his schools were invited to take part, with four selected as they already have a breakfast club run by Greggs.

He said it was "likely we would lose 70p per child when you include

staffing and food".

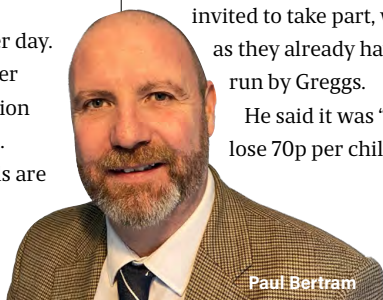
The other 11 schools will not be taking part because the trust would lose income from its wraparound care and "wouldn't be able to cover the scale of staff required".

While he strongly believes in the breakfast club scheme, he says scale is an issue.

"If all the children arrive in one go for half an hour, I'm not sure I'll be able to fit them in the hall. What breakfast clubs shouldn't be is just a feeding station."

Simon Kidwell, principal at Hartford Manor primary school, in Cheshire, has calculated the scheme could leave his school with a £4,000 shortfall.

To "break even" they would have to increase their planned pupil-to-staff ratio or reduce food



Paul Bertram



Simon Kidwell

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expenditure.

"As you can see, the margins are very tight and we haven't accounted for any admin costs, staff training costs, heating, lighting or energy associated with food preparation," he said.

The government's impact assessment states that schools will benefit financially from the breakfast clubs, as the policy allows them "to reallocate their budgets to other priority areas".

It also says it will save parents more than £400 per year and help children to concentrate.

### Time and space also (costly) issues

But there are wider concerns about the financial hit to schools when the scheme is rolled out nationally.

Oxfordshire County Council has agreed to spend £120,000 to identify barriers to roll-out – including any extra costs.

A survey of trust leaders by Edurio, commissioned by Schools Week, found funding was a "recurring" concern, analysis of their responses by ChatGPT stated.

One leader said the current pilot project funding was "so poor it won't cover food, let alone staff". Also, the free clubs would "cannibalise existing breakfast clubs' income streams, which are more needed than ever [in] primary schools".

Another, who had a small school in the early adopter scheme, said the "amount of time it takes to provide lunches and clear [them] away" suggests 30 minutes for breakfast with similar numbers "will be impractical".

Another leader said that, if all 1,000 pupils at one of their schools attended, they would "not be able to accommodate them in one space and this would have considerable impact on staffing".

Kidwell added: "We're not entirely sure what the government intends the scheme to achieve. Is the breakfast club designed to support families financially, help parents get to work on time, or improve school attendance?"

"Clearer guidance is essential to help us create the best possible provision."

### Poorest schools already get breakfast help

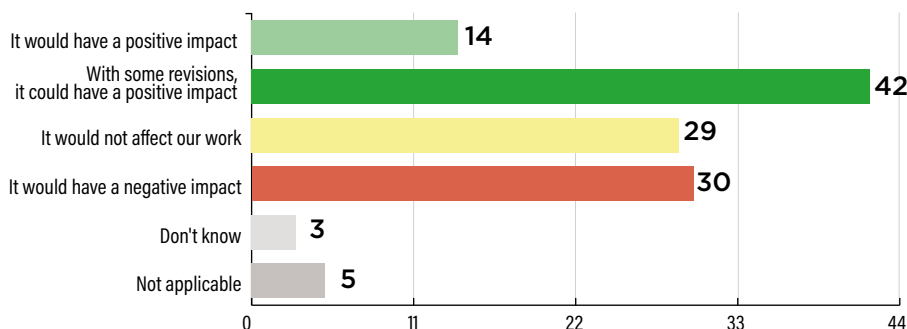
Around 12% of state schools in England already offer a taxpayer-subsidised breakfast club through the government's national school breakfast scheme, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said.

These are schools in the areas with the highest level of deprivation



Lindsey MacDonald

## Will breakfast clubs have a positive impact?



Source to: Edurio survey of 120 academy trust CEOs, leading 1,000 schools

SCHOOLS WEEK

## 'If this is the best they can offer, they are going to struggle'

– meaning that some of the poorest schools already do provide breakfasts.

Kellogg's provides its own grants to fund breakfast clubs at 650 primary schools and 200 secondary schools.

Lindsey MacDonald, chief executive officer at the Magic Breakfast children's charity, told an education select committee last week that funding for breakfast clubs was "not anywhere near" enough.

"You're limiting and stifling innovation and schools to take the context that they operate within... schools will attempt to pick up those costs themselves, and it will be diverted from other much-needed budget lines in school systems," she said.

The IFS has previously reported that food-only provision – where pupils would have breakfast in the classroom – would cost around £55 per pupil per year. A traditional before-school breakfast club would cost £110 per pupil.

The IFS concluded that Labour's funding would cover food-only provision for all pupils, or for 60 per cent of children in a traditional breakfast club model.

Julie McCulloch, policy director at the Association of School and College

Leaders, said inadequate funding would "stretch already challenging budgets to breaking point and risk disruption to any existing wraparound care".

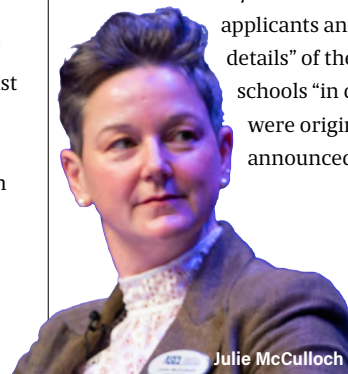
Meanwhile on Thursday, the government updated its guidance for the early adopter scheme with information on how schools can exit the pilot. It said the programme was "intended to test delivery and generate learning for national roll-out."

"Given this, the department does not expect schools to exit the early adopters scheme and will work with early adopter schools to overcome challenges encountered."

Should a school "wish to exit", they must notify the department and "engage on potential solutions". If they do still want to leave, parents must be given one term's notice.

A Department for Education spokesperson said the clubs will help "break the unfair link between background and success".

They are "working closely" with applicants and "set out the details" of the 750 early adopter schools "in due course". They were originally due to be announced in "early 2025".



Julie McCulloch



## NEWS: SCHOOLS BILL

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# 'Lower your tone' and 'allow me to finish': DfE's account of Birbalsingh meeting

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE

Bridget Phillipson had to ask headteacher Katharine Birbalsingh to "lower her tone" and "allow her to finish her sentences", official government minutes of a controversial meeting between the pair claim.

The documents, obtained by Schools Week under the freedom of information act, also allege that the school leader repeatedly interrupted the education secretary and asked her if she was enacting academy reforms because of her ambitions to become prime minister.

The academies section of the children's wellbeing and schools bill has prompted a very public spat between the minister and headteacher of Michaela Community School.

Birbalsingh accused the politician of not being "interested" in schools and having a "Marxist ideological dislike" of academies in an open letter and Spectator article after their meeting on February 3.

The Mail newspaper this week published its own account based on sources, claiming Birbalsingh "became so animated that officials working in the office outside of the closed meeting room could hear her through the walls".

## 'Remove the heat'

But Schools Week has obtained the full minutes from the meeting, written by a government official, which shed further light on what allegedly happened.

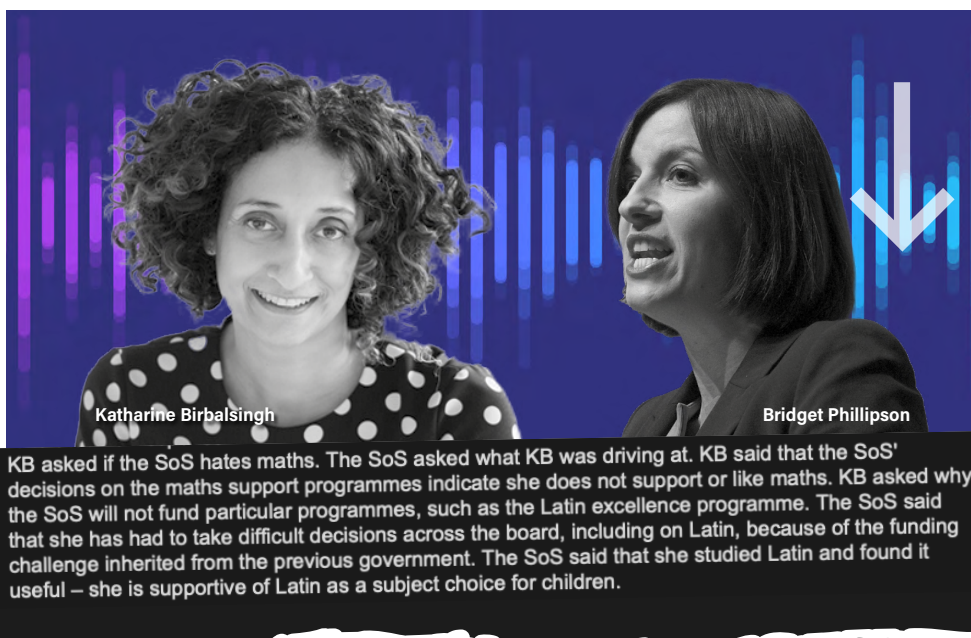
In the minutes, "SoS" means Phillipson, "KB" is Birbalsingh and "JS" is James Sibley, Michaela's deputy head.

One section read: "The SoS stated she would need to ask KB to lower her tone, and asked they remove the heat from the discussion.

"The SoS emphasised she would appreciate if KB would allow her to finish her sentences so that she can address KB's questions and concerns in turn."

On uniform, Sibley said the school's progress 8 score – the highest in the country – was "directly linked to good behaviour, which is driven by wearing branded uniform items".

He added that the school's second-hand



KB asked if the SoS hates maths. The SoS asked what KB was driving at. KB said that the SoS' decisions on the maths support programmes indicate she does not support or like maths. KB asked why the SoS will not fund particular programmes, such as the Latin excellence programme. The SoS said that she has had to take difficult decisions across the board, including on Latin, because of the funding challenge inherited from the previous government. The SoS said that she studied Latin and found it useful – she is supportive of Latin as a subject choice for children.

branded uniform is "cheaper than non-branded items because the claws of capitalist vultures, such as TikTok influencers, drive up the price of non-branded items".

Meanwhile, Birbalsingh said her school "actively chooses to cut time in other areas so that they can focus on English and maths; not because they dislike other subjects, but they see English and maths as being more important.

"KB acknowledged that the SoS says she wants to support poor children, but that the bill is tying Michaela's hands in doing so."

She also asked if the education secretary "hates maths" after a scheme was axed by the government.

In another section, Birbalsingh had said that "as she herself did not understand politics, she should not expect the SoS to understand education because the SoS has not been a head teacher".

The document also revealed that Birbalsingh said colleagues in Westminster told her to ask if the reason Phillipson was "introducing this bill, is because she wants to become the leader of the Labour party".

Phillipson also asked Birbalsingh "why she has said in public that she thinks the SoS is a Marxist".

"KB responded that it is clear from the [schools bill] measures that the SoS is trying to exercise state control and prevent independence."

## 'It was just a conversation'

But Birbalsingh has contested some of the minutes, which are not verbatim.

She says Phillipson said she wanted to "cool things down" rather than telling her to "lower your tone". And she says she did not ask Phillipson why she hated maths.

The headteacher also said a claim in the documents that Michaela "refused" a meeting with officials to explain the bill was incorrect.

She added they were the DfE's own minutes, and "even if the person was neutral, writing in a meeting is inadequate to cover all that was asked. I asked more questions than are on there."

Officials were also "openly hostile in their body movements", she claimed.

The headteacher dismissed claims in the Mail that she could be heard through the walls. She said that "even by their own minutes, it's obvious that it was just a conversation".

When Birbalsingh published her initial letter, a government source said Phillipson "doesn't need lectures from anyone on the importance of a good education for disadvantaged children. She has lived it."

But Birbalsingh said: "There was no lecture. I was asking questions. I behaved more like a journalist, not showing deference, wanting to know answers to my questions, and wanting to move on when I saw she wasn't really giving me an answer."

[READ THE MINUTES IN FULL HERE](#)

## NEWS: OFSTED

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## Behaviour improving says Ofsted, but teachers beg to differ

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

EXCLUSIVE

The number of schools being marked down on behaviour by Ofsted has plunged by more than half since Covid – despite teachers saying classroom disruption is increasing.

Some have suggested it shows Ofsted inspectors have “lost their nerve” to award grades that are less than ‘good’. But others say schools are getting better at handling behaviour – and the data reflects that.

In the 2019-20 academic year, 19.9 per cent of schools were rated ‘requires improvement’ or ‘inadequate’ for behaviour and attitudes. This more than halved to just 7.7 per cent last year.

But, according to the government’s latest national behaviour survey, published last year, three-quarters of teachers said misbehaviour had stopped or interrupted teaching in at least some lessons that week – a 12 percentage point rise on the previous year.

Headteacher Sam Strickland, an expert on behaviour, said it “often features as a key push factor for why people leave teaching”.

“But there appears to be something of a disconnect between Ofsted judgments for behaviour and what is being reported across the sector by people working within schools.”

In May 2023, the government’s behaviour survey found teachers reported that seven minutes were lost to misbehaviour every half-hour lesson.

**Inspectors more reluctant to mark down?**

Ofsted has been heavily criticised and is overseeing wide-ranging reforms after the death of Caversham primary school head Ruth Perry. A coroner found an ‘inadequate’ Ofsted inspection contributed to her suicide.

Former HMI Adrian Gray said: “Inspectors are sensitive to accusations of being mean and, I hear from some, suspect that Ofsted will not back them up if something goes sour,” he told Schools Week.

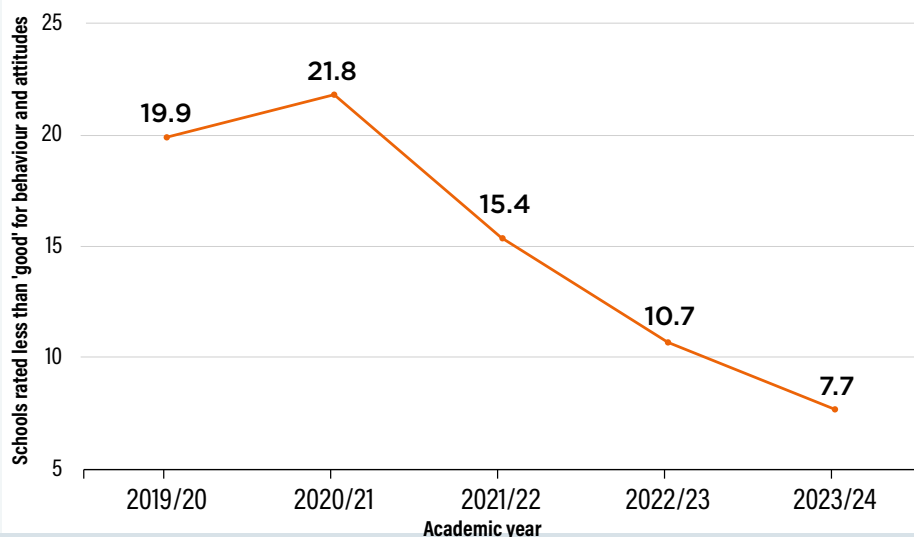
He questioned whether this has led to Ofsted “losing its nerve” to mark down schools. The concerns also seem to be echoed by Matt Newman, national officer of FDA, a union that represents many HMIs.

Newman said a “significant minority of schools and trusts who know how to exert pressure are making inspections more adversarial” – something Ofsted chief Sir Martyn Oliver has also raised before.



Jeffery Quaye

## Ofsted marks down fewer schools on behaviour



Source: Ofsted management information data

SCHOOLS WEEK

Newman added: “The level of complaints puts further pressure on hardworking inspectors who are striving to provide parents with the most accurate information about their children’s schools.”

But others have refuted this. Jeffery Quaye, national director of education and standards at Aspirations Academies Trust and a former Ofsted inspector, said grades were “based on the evidence that the inspectors gather and evaluate using the education inspection framework”.

He added: “We have received a number of inspections [at Aspirations], and the inspectors were fair and not particularly under any pressure to be more lenient.”

**‘Standards in schools are rising’**

Quaye said the change was actually down to rising standards in schools. “My experience is that the majority of schools have positive behaviour, which allows teaching and learning to progress without disruption,” he told Schools Week.

“I think the improved picture should be welcomed by the sector.”

Tom Bennett, the government’s behaviour tsar, said that schools in England “have been steadily improving across the whole cohort for the last decade”.

He pointed to the government’s behaviour hubs and guidance that “didn’t only make it clear that schools were expected to maintain order but also provided sensible and practical ways to do this”.

Sector leaders also suggested that a revision of teacher training programmes

has placed “a greater emphasis on behaviour”.

Quaye said the NPQ for leading behaviour and culture in particular has “developed the expertise of leaders in schools to promote a culture of positive behaviour”.

Bennett also pointed to Ofsted’s approach to evaluating behaviour now “aligning” with the government’s guidance. “This created a fairly unprecedented climate where both of these parts of the education sector cohered, probably for the first time ever,” he added.

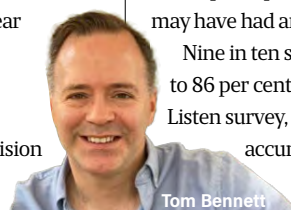
A source who deals closely with inspectors also said: “Ofsted’s shift towards a more empathetic culture is reflected in the increased number of ungraded inspections.

“These inspections give schools more time to resolve issues and concerns before a full graded inspection.”

The rise also mirrors a wider shift in more favourable reports in recent years. Ofsted said the drop in lower grades started after Covid, with most schools previously less than ‘good’ improving at their next inspection after the 2019 framework was introduced.

The fact that inspections were being “refocused on a new evidence-based conception of high-quality education has encouraged schools to develop and prioritise their curriculum” and “this may have had an impact”.

Nine in ten schools are now ‘good’, compared to 86 per cent in 2019. However, in Ofsted’s Big Listen survey, most parents said this was not an accurate reflection of the sector.



Tom Bennett



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## NEWS: SCHOOLS BILL

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## FSM check system redesign to boost take-up

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE

The government is redesigning its system for checking free school meals eligibility to allow parents and schools to use it independently of local councils.

Early education minister Stephen Morgan made the announcement at a committee hearing on Tuesday where the government's children's wellbeing and schools bill was debated.

Backbench MPs had tried to amend the bill to introduce automatic enrolment across the country, amid fears the opt-in system currently used is excluding around 250,000 eligible children.

At present, the government's "apply for free school meals" service simply points users to their local council's website. Councils then have access to a digital portal to check their eligibility based on the benefits their families claim.

But Morgan said "that checking system is being redesigned to allow parents and schools to check eligibility independently of their local authorities.

"The system will make it quicker and easier to check eligibility for free school meals, and has the potential to further boost take-up by families who meet the eligibility criteria."



Stephen Morgan

Some councils have already introduced auto-enrolment, whereby eligible children are offered meals unless their families specifically opt out.

Schools Week revealed in 2023 that in Lewisham, south-east London, this led to increased pupil premium funding of £1.2 million. Implementing the system had cost just £800.

Morgan told the committee he was "aware of a range of measures being implemented by local authorities to boost the take-up of free lunches, as we heard earlier.

"Locally-led efforts are more likely to meet the particular needs of the community, and we welcome local authorities taking action to ensure

that families access the support for which they are eligible, subject to those activities meeting legal requirements, including those on data protection."

But he said the Department for Education was "working with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to explore legal gateways that could enable better data sharing".

And the government was "considering further work to improve auto-enrolment".

He added: "Improved enrolment for meals is needed in the context of the spending review and through the work of the child poverty taskforce."

The DfE was approached for more information on what this would entail, but did not respond.

## New CEO training programme under review

The government is reviewing its academy trust CEO development programme, just a year after it launched. But the two cohorts currently taking part won't be affected.

Run by the National Institute of Teaching (NlOT), the programme launched last February with 25 participants. A second cohort of 50 started in September.

Speaking at the public bill committee on Tuesday, shadow education minister Neil O'Brien said: "My understanding is that the programme will end after the current cohort completes it, and

that there is no plan for another cohort."

Schools minister Catherine McKinnell pointed to the government's recently announced review of national professional qualifications.

The review "will include consideration of the training needs of those leading several schools, including large multi-academy trusts".

McKinnell previously confirmed in a written answer that NlOT's current £3.79 million contract will still run until next March as planned.

## 'Keep assessing mental health data'

The government is being urged to confirm it will continue to run a landmark survey that has shed further light on rising mental health issues in children.

The NHS's mental health of children and young people survey relaunched in 2017 for the first time since 2004. It found one in eight school-age children had a probable mental health disorder.

In 2023, the wave four report found prevalence had increased to one in five.

Damian Hinds, who was education secretary at the time of the first report, told MPs this week



he understood "that there is no current commitment to wave five".

He urged minister Stephen Morgan to "strongly encourage his colleagues at the [health and social care] department to maintain that data series, because it is incredibly important".

Morgan said he would "certainly take away that point". The DHSC was approached for comment.

## NEWS: CURRICULUM

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# Drowning exposes failure to provide statutory swimming lessons, says coroner

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

A coroner is concerned that primary schools are not fulfilling their statutory duty to offer swimming lessons following the drowning of a teenage boy.

Alex Crook, 15, died while paddling with friends at a lake known as Scotsman's Flash, in Wigan, during warm weather last September. He was paddling at the edge and reportedly slipped into deeper water – but was unable to swim.

Following an inquest last month, coroner John Pollard issued a prevention of future deaths report to Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council.

"[Alex] did not have statutory swimming lessons at key stage 1 or 2 and I am informed that three schools in the Wigan area are still in breach of their statutory duty to deliver such lessons," said Pollard in his report.

## Primaries have swimming lesson duty

The national curriculum says all primary schools "must provide swimming instruction either in key stage 1 or key stage 2".

Pupils must be taught to swim "competently, confidently and proficiently" over a distance of at least 25 metres. They should be able to "use a range of strokes effectively" and to "perform safe self-rescue in different water-based situations".

But a Teacher Tapp survey of more than 3,000 primary school teachers last August found 22 per cent said that swimming was not offered by their school.

Figures from Sport England's Active Lives Children and Young People Survey show that, in 2023, 71 per cent of year 7s were able to swim 25m unaided. This was down from 77 per cent five years earlier.

The number of child drowning deaths in England has doubled in four years to 41 in 2023, Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS) figures show.

## Schools 'allowed to slip through net'

"With [swimming] being in the national curriculum, it should be 100 per cent of kids," Alex's father Neil Crook, who now campaigns for better water safety, told Schools Week. "It's something they need to be acting on straight away."



Neil Crook with his son Alex Crook

"The schools all over the country that aren't [providing swimming lessons], they are allowed to slip through the net. It's not being looked at properly and they are just letting it pass."

Crook said schools should make swimming lessons a priority, while the government should be doing more to ensure schools are fulfilling their statutory duty.

The Sport England study found teachers at 36 per cent of state primaries said their schools offered fewer than 10 lessons per pupil. Five years earlier, that figure was around 28 per cent.

Philip Brownlie at Swim England, the national governing body for swimming, said budgetary constraints were "undoubtedly a factor" in the falling rate of swimming proficiency. The cost of swimming pool entry and transport has also increased.

But he added: "It's absolutely no exaggeration, sadly, to say this can be a matter of life and death."

## Budget impacts and closing pools

Brownlie continued: "Drowning is one of the most common causes of accidental death in England still and, for many children, particularly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, school could be the only opportunity they have to learn that. The stakes are huge."

Swim England's 2023 report highlighted "persistent inequalities" in swimming proficiency. Just over half of black and Asian pupils could swim 25m unaided by the time they left primary school.

Meanwhile, many local pools are closing. Swim England's report revealed that more than a thousand public pools,

including 450 council-owned pools, have shut since 2010.

Brownlie said a "fundamental problem" was also the "real lack of data and accountability" on which schools are fulfilling their statutory duty. "Who's monitoring if a school isn't doing it? What is the comeuppance?"

This is "not about finger-pointing" but "saying this is a really big issue... and seeing what support can be provided [to boost swimming] where needed."

Some progress does appear to have been made on accountability. From this academic year, primary schools are required to publish attainment levels for curriculum requirements to the DfE.

Brownlie stressed that the government must take action, once figures paint a clearer picture of swimming attainment.

Swim England believes Ofsted should be "checking on school swimming and water safety much more frequently than [they are] currently" to ensure that schools are fulfilling their requirements.

Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council said that, since the coroner issued his report, a letter has "been sent to all schools to remind them of their duties in relation to providing swimming lessons".

The authority "will be following this up with individual schools where required".

Ofsted and the DfE have been approached for comment.

"We will never get over losing Alex and we don't want another family to have to go through this pain," Crook said.



Philip Brownlie, from Swim England

## EXPLAINER: RISE

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
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## RISE advisers: how many, what they'll do, and more ...

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

The implementation of regional school improvement advisers has caused confusion and led to criticism. Government officials briefed *Schools Week* on how they will work....

**Who are the advisers, and how many will there be?**

The DfE has already appointed 20 advisers. It will hire another 50 by April.

Civil servants will support them. This includes a "small number" dedicated specifically to regional improvement for standards and excellence (RISE).

There is then a "wider group" working in the DfE's nine regions. They will also provide support alongside their existing duties.

**How many schools will they work with?**

Advisers are already working with 32 schools, the DfE said. But it will take until March 2026 for all "stuck" schools to get support.

As of December 31, there were 626 schools that met the definition of "stuck". But almost 200 of those have already changed structure since their last inspection.

However, the DfE has said it still expects to support about 600 schools. This is because others will become "stuck" after future inspections.

**How are schools being prioritised?**

The government said it started with schools where a structural change was already on the cards but was not progressing quickly enough.

Schools with two negative grades – previously called "coasting" – faced academisation under the previous government's approach.

**What will RISE advisers actually do?**

The teams will first engage with responsible bodies – academy trusts and local authorities.

They will discuss "the areas that are most in need of improvement", as identified by Ofsted and "other sources" of information.

The RISE advisers will then draw up a "bespoke" improvement plan, make sure it is put in place and monitor its implementation.

**Who makes the decisions on commissioning?**

It is the RISE advisers' job to broker support from other organisations. But the DfE insists it will "absolutely" have oversight over this process.

Advisers are seconded, and therefore "they are the DfE in this process".

"We are the decision makers... on the plan and ultimately on the content of that plan and the funding," the DfE said.

But the government added it "remains the responsibility of the responsible body... to secure improvement for that school with the benefit of this intervention package, which we will have put together".

**What if school or trust doesn't agree with an improvement plan?**

The government is consulting on making the improvement packages mandatory.

The department said it would expect responsible bodies "in many cases to be really hungry and keen and looking forward to getting that opportunity".

But, if they don't agree, the RISE advisers' job "ultimately is to make a recommendation and decide on behalf of the secretary of state for the right support for that school and the responsible body".

**How quickly will intervention take place?**

The government already has a "stock to deal with" – referring to existing stuck schools.

But, with new stuck schools being identified, the DfE expects it to be a "matter of a small number of weeks to enable the initial conversation, discussion about the content of a plan, the identification of the right support organisations and the confirmation of resource".

The department said fast intervention would not come as a "surprise to anybody".

These are schools "that have been stuck for a long time" and the DfE would be "absolutely appalled if they haven't already got something on the table saying, this is what we're trying to do to improve... What we're doing is adding to that".

**How will help be identified?**

RISE teams will draw on the DfE's funded programme of hubs, but also from "strong trusts who are doing great work", based on a "range of indicators of quality and inclusive education".

The same is true of councils, it said.

Ofsted's consultation also proposes a new 'exemplary' grade, which would provide an "extra source of identified practice... when putting together these bespoke interventions".

**Is there more money coming?**

The government has allocated £20 million so far, for grants of up to £100,000 per stuck school. That funding covers the period up until next March.

Future funding is dependent on the government's current spending review, but the DfE said there was an "expectation and confirmation of the approach to RISE continuing – and continuing to be supported appropriately".

**PS Trust CEOs are split on the changes**

A survey of 123 trust chief executives conducted by Edurio shows that 37 per cent believe the introduction of the RISE teams will have no impact on the sector.

Just under 30 per cent said it would have a positive effect, while 26 per cent think it will hurt schools.

But, when asked about the impact the teams will have on their academies, more than half of trust bosses thought it would be negligible.



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## NEWS: ACADEMIES

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## Free school gets £500k government bailout after wage increase

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

A private school-turned-academy saddled with a six-figure deficit after it increased support staff wages to national pay scales because of recruitment challenges has been handed a £500,000 lifeline by ministers.

The Royal School Wolverhampton expects more government cash will be needed to move it out of the red, after drawing up a “recovery plan” with officials.

It comes as Labour bids to strip away academy freedoms over teacher and support staff pay.

It means academies will have to follow a new pay “floor” for teachers and potentially observe pay scales for support staff.

In December, the Royal School – an all-through free school that offers state boarding – was issued with a notice to improve (NtI) by the Department for Education after failing to approve a balanced budget for 2023-24.

Accounts, published last week, show the single-academy trust (SAT) ended the year with an overall deficit of almost £765,000.

Among the reasons given for its in-year losses was its decision to move support staff wages in line with national levels.

This “was necessary for recruitment and retention”, as it “acknowledge[d] and resolved the dissatisfaction in wages raised”, accounts state.



Trusts currently do not have to follow national pay rules. But Labour, through its employment rights bill, wants to re-instate the support staff negotiating body.

The changes will apply to maintained schools and academies to ensure all staff “have access to fair pay and conditions”.

The Royal School’s finances were also rocked by a cyber-attack, which hit “all support services... and affected access and provision of management information”.

Accounts added the SAT received an interest-free £499,000 loan from DfE.

But more financial “support will be required... to ensure a positive cash position can be maintained”.

This is the second case this academic year where a trust has been handed an emergency loan to keep it afloat. Schools Week revealed last month that the Arthur Terry Learning Partnership, which runs 24 schools, was offered £1.5 million.

In 2021-22, 10 trusts were given just over £3

million in additional support to enable “financial recovery”. Government has not produced more up-to-date figures.

The Royal School’s NtI also noted that the SAT had failed to comply with requirements to give non-teaching staff “access to the Local Government Pension Scheme”.

Accounts show the £580,000 “historical liability” was discovered in October following “a legal review by King’s Counsel”. Eligible staff have since been enrolled with LGPS.

A Royal School spokesperson said it was “an independent school with its own pension arrangements” prior to its conversion in 2016. It originally believed this could continue for all support staff.

The Royal School stressed its financial difficulties were largely caused by the cyber-attack and the “recently identified pension matters”.

It is “working rapidly and closely with the DfE to return to self-sufficiency” from September 2026.

The National Education Union states “nearly all” academies adhere to national pay scales for support staff.

Nathan Jeremiah, managing director of school resource management adviser supplier EPI, said pay freedoms “can help academies because to compete you may need to do more [in terms of pay] because the local market conditions will demand that to be the case”.

But he added: “I don’t think the intent of what the academy freedoms were there for has played out here.”

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

## Trust’s growth plan (partially) knocked back

A 21-school academy trust’s bid to almost double in size has been knocked back amid government concerns over its rate of growth.

Nineteen applications for schools to join the Embark Federation, in Derbyshire, had been lodged with the Department for Education between June 2022 and last September.

All of the proposals went before the DfE’s East Midlands advisory board last month – with just six given the green light.

Minutes for the meeting, published this week, said: “To ensure a manageable rate of growth... 13 applications are declined at this time.

“Future applications to join Embark... will be considered by the department after a period

of consolidation of at least 12 months.”

The minutes noted that the MAT has developed a membership model only available to schools wishing to join it.

To manage its “large pipeline”, prospective academies “were prioritised on the basis of a range of factors”, like the trust’s capacity, the position of the schools and the “strategic needs of the area”.

The six schools allowed to move into Embark are rated ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ in all areas in their latest Ofsted inspections. They should also “add improvement capacity to the trust”.

The DfE will offer those schools whose applications were rejected “the opportunity for a conversation about next steps”.

One MAT CEO, who asked not to be named, argued that “it would be a huge challenge to successfully engage 19 new schools simultaneously” as each one is “unique”.

Such growth “would beg the question as to whether this is in the best interests of children and their local communities”, they added.

Embark CEO Matt Crawford said he had received “significant interest” from schools to join his trust which has resulted in “a high volume of applications”.

The trust will “work closely with those that were unsuccessful this time through our membership offer until a time when they will be able to officially join us in the future”.

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## NEWS: RECRUITMENT

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# Shorter apprenticeships aim to increase training flexibility

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Shortening the minimum length of apprenticeships to eight months will give “the type of flexibility the teacher training sector has been asking for”, the government has said.

But officials have yet to confirm the change will apply to the increasingly popular teaching course.

As part of a package of apprenticeship reforms unveiled this week, ministers said they would shorten the minimum duration of such courses from 12 to eight months from September.

The 12-month minimum has caused a headache for those delivering the postgraduate teaching apprenticeship (PGTA), which was approved for delivery in 2017 and now accounts for 7 per cent of entrants into postgrad teacher training each year.

Qualified teacher status is issued after nine months, as it would be on any other postgraduate teacher training course. Providers had reported that some apprentices dropped out after achieving QTS, but before completing their “end-point assessment”.

Apprenticeship providers face losing at least



20 per cent of their funding per apprentice for each non-completion. They receive 80 per cent of their funding monthly during a course and the remainder once the apprentice has completed their training.

For those who don't drop out, providers have to carry on providing training for apprentices who are essentially qualified for the job they are going into.

The Department for Education said shorter apprenticeships “will be possible from August this year, as we are reducing the minimum duration in legislation to eight months.

“The flexibility will help employers get the skills they need, when they need them.

“This is the type of flexibility the ITT sector has been asking for and we are committed to working

with them on how this can help in teaching apprenticeships.”

The DfE has not yet confirmed that it will shorten the length of the PGTA but said it would “be setting out more details in due course”.

James Noble-Rogers, chief executive of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, said this was a “very welcome, if overdue, announcement [that] will help to resolve some of the logistical and financial issues that have until now bedevilled the PGTA”.

Numbers entering teaching via the apprenticeship route, which is for existing graduates only, have soared.

In 2019-20, there were 164 entrants, rising to 883 in 2021-22 and 958 in 2023-24. Numbers jumped this year to 1,488.

In 2021-22 and 2022-23, the only years for which data is available, around 15 per cent of teacher apprentices dropped out before the end of their courses. However, this includes trainees who dropped out before achieving QTS.

A separate, new degree apprenticeship route into teaching will be trialled from September. It is open to non-graduates but lasts for four years.

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## NEWS: MENTAL HEALTH

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## Mental health lessons caused upset, says study

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Interventions to boost pupils' understanding of mental health created longer-term "increased emotional difficulties" when trialled in schools in England, a landmark study found.

Four out of five interventions trialled as part of the government-funded Education for Wellbeing programme led to "adverse" or "negative" effects on some pupils.

Run by the Anna Freud Centre between 2018 and 2024, the study was billed as England's largest research trial of school-based mental health interventions. It aimed to "evaluate pioneering ways of supporting the mental wellbeing of pupils".

One of the interventions tested was Youth Aware Mental Health (YAM), a programme of five lessons for secondary school pupils that was developed in Sweden and the US.

The trial involved 12,166 pupils across 153 schools, with lessons delivered by a professional from outside the school, "using role play designed to improve pupils' understanding of mental health and reduce suicide rates".

The Anna Freud Centre's evaluation report, published last Friday, found YAM had "no overall statistically significant impact on young people's emotional difficulties at the short-term follow up".

However, "several schools asked to deliver YAM did not implement the intervention".

Further analysis "suggested that YAM did lead to an initial reduction in emotional difficulties, directly after delivery, in schools that were able to implement the intervention".

But "unexpectedly, we found YAM led to increased emotional difficulties at the long-term follow up, nine to 12 months after intervention delivery".

The study did not recommend the continued delivery of YAM until "more is known about how to mitigate risk of longer-term harm".

Dr Camilla Wasserman, YAM's creator, told Schools Week that studies in Europe, the US and Australia had showed "significant reductions in depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, and suicidal ideation".

But she said it was "very difficult to interpret differences between countries and how



adaptations, implementation questions, cultural factors and school climates can influence results of these kinds of studies".

"The fact YAM does show positive effects when implemented in full draws our attention to the barriers towards full implementation," Wasserman added.

"We will reflect on these barriers and try to better understand which factors lead to successful/unsuccessful implementation of the programme."

Also trialled in (different) secondary schools was The Mental Health and High School Curriculum Guide, or The Guide, a teacher training programme from Canada aimed at developing understanding of mental health.

It trains teachers to deliver a six-session programme to pupils, outlining common mental disorders, tackling stigma and improving knowledge of sources of support for mental health.

In the short term, The Guide was "associated with improvements on some other outcomes (attitudes towards mental health, knowledge of mental health and mental health behaviours).

"However, it was also associated with increased emotional difficulties and decreased life satisfaction at the long-term follow-up.

"As with YAM, future studies should further explore the long-term outcomes of this intervention."

The evaluation report noted that "adaptations" were made to both YAM and The Guide which "may have had an impact on the effectiveness of the interventions".

Wasserman said the findings "lead us to speculate that calling attention to and inviting young people to learn more and become aware of their mental health might make it more likely that participants report emotional difficulties at follow-up they were not aware of or able to put into words before participating in such programmes".

The Anna Freud Centre told Schools Week there were "safeguarding measures in place" for the study, such as pupils having "detailed guidance" about further support on offer.

Other interventions tested were found to increase emotional difficulties among some age groups.

For example, a trial of mindfulness-based exercises showed "promise" in secondary schools.

But in primary "the opposite was observed with moderate compliance increasing emotional difficulties, which increased further still with high levels of compliance".

A test of relaxation techniques suggests they "can lead to reduced emotional difficulties if delivered regularly and consistently in primary school settings.

"However, in secondary schools, more frequent use of relaxation techniques is associated with higher levels of emotional difficulties."

One intervention yielded much more positive results, however.

Strategies for Safety and Wellbeing, an eight-lesson mental health literacy programme, was found to have a "statistically significant impact on children and young people's intended help-seeking in primary schools", but not in secondary schools.

However, implementation findings suggest that in secondaries, the programme "can lead to increased intended help-seeking if all sessions are delivered".

It is a "recommended intervention" for primaries, and "shows promise" for secondaries – but only if "implemented in full".

The study has been criticised for the number of participating pupils who dropped out.

Of 6,306 pupils allocated to YAM and 6,398 allocated to The Guide, there were just 3,650 and 3,771 final surveys returned, equating to 58 and 59 per cent.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?

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## Holiday schemes secure funding for one more year

The holiday activities and food programme will continue from April, ministers have confirmed, but funding beyond the next financial year depends on the spending review.

Councils, schools and club providers had been awaiting clarity over the funding for the scheme, which was due to run out at the end of March.

Stephen Morgan, the minister for early education, told MPs this week he was "delighted" the "great programme" will continue for 2025-26. It has secured £200 million funding.

But the programme's future depends on the



outcome of the spending review, due later this year.

Launched in 2018 with a limited pilot, the programme gives councils the funds to provide clubs and meals for children eligible for free school meals and others they consider vulnerable in the summer, Christmas and Easter holidays.

[Full story here](#)

## Show MPs what you do best, trusts told

The body representing England's academy trusts is urging CEOs to build "constructive relationships with MPs" so they "understand" academies "are indeed community schools".

Confederation of School Trusts (CST) chief Leora Cruddas told members this week to reach out to local politicians and showcase "the very best of what we do".

Her intervention comes amid a row over Labour's plan to row back on academy freedoms. Some Labour politicians have also criticised trusts more generally.

Cruddas said: "We would also like to begin a conversation about building proactive and constructive relationships with MPs and local politicians."

"We need to make sure that this is consistent across our sector and that we are showcasing the very best of what we do and the impact of the trust sector, helping politicians to understand that academy schools are indeed community schools rooted deeply in, and at the heart of, their communities."

[Full story here](#)

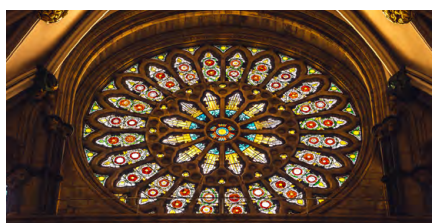
## Faith admissions cap for free schools survives

The government has abandoned a plan to abolish a rule capping the proportion of pupils that oversubscribed free schools can select based on faith at 50 per cent.

The previous Conservative government consulted on the proposals last year. They also included a plan to remove the block on new faith special schools.

But the Labour government has now ditched the plan. Two-thirds of the 3,668 consultation respondents "disagreed or strongly disagreed with both proposals".

The cap 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.



Paul Barber, director of the Catholic Education Service, said the decision "does not alter the Catholic sector's legal ability to open new schools".

He also welcomed the government's "continued commitment to the opening of new voluntary aided schools in its children's wellbeing and schools bill."

[Full story here](#)

## Bauckham confirmed as Ofqual chief



Sir Ian Bauckham

Sir Ian Bauckham has been confirmed as the permanent chief regulator of exams watchdog Ofqual.

Parliament's education select committee agreed in December that Bauckham, who has served as interim chief regulator at Ofqual since last January and was the government's preferred candidate, should be given the top job.

On Friday, Bauckham was formally appointed to the five-year role, after the privy council confirmed his appointment.

Bauckham said: "Qualifications are the currency of education. Ofqual, as guardian of standards, will protect their value and integrity to ensure they remain trusted by students, teachers, universities and employers alike."

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson said Bauckham was "exceptionally suited to lead Ofqual in maintaining a system that provides all young people with high-quality, rigorous qualifications and training, equipping them with the skills needed to succeed".

[Full story here](#)



## MOVERS AND SHAKERS

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
CONTACT US [NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK](mailto:NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK)**Zoe Levitt****Executive director of education, Consilium Academies****Start date:** April**Current job:** Director of education secondary, Lift Schools**Interesting fact:** Zoe has a soft spot for animals, owning two cats and two dogs, and is the proud owner of 286 cookbooks (yes, really!). She is currently walking to complete Yorkshire's Wolds Way.

# Movers & Shakers

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

**Susie Babar****Chief people officer, E-ACT****Start date:** February**Current job:** Head of HR (UK) at international law firm Simmons & Simmons**Interesting fact:** From the courtroom to the classroom – Susie, a former lawyer turned HR leader, brings 20 years of expertise to education, finally joining her teacher siblings (to the delight of her mum).**Clive Lawrence****Member of the education honours committee****Start date:** February**Concurrent job:** Chief education officer, Esteem Multi-Academy Trust**Interesting fact:** Clive is a kinship carer for his niece, further strengthening his commitment to championing inclusion and equity for all children. Having grown up in social housing and experienced disadvantage firsthand, he understands the transformative power of education.**Matthew Evans****Chief executive, The Athelstan Trust****Start date:** September**Current job:** Headteacher, Farmor's School, Swindon**Interesting fact:** Matthew was once the vocalist in a band called The Brainwashed Caterpillar. However, a socialist working men's club once accidentally billed them as 'The Brainwashed Capitalists'. It didn't go down well. Also, the exit music at his wedding was the theme song of Darth Maul from Star Wars.**Dave Ellison-Lee****Chief executive, Rise multi-academy trust****Start date:** February**Former job:** Interim CEO, Rise**Interesting fact:** Dave is a big ice hockey fan and a season ticket holder for Nottingham Panthers. He's also travelled to the US to watch National Hockey League games.

## Former Teach First gets CEO gig

FEATURED



James Toop has been announced as new chief executive of education charity Teach First.

Toop – himself a Teach First alumnus having trained as a teacher in the programme's inaugural cohort back in 2003 – will take over from Russell Hobby, who has led the organisation since 2017 and is stepping down this summer.

Toop is currently CEO of youth activist movement Bite Back, and before that served as CEO of teacher training organisation Ambition Institute. Toop said he is "thrilled" by his appointment.

Teach First chair Dame Vivian Hunt DBE said Toop will bring "a deep commitment to our mission, values and charity".

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## INVESTIGATION

ROSA FURNEAUX | @ROSAFURNEAUX



# Millions in profits, £100k charges – but private schools still fail standards check

The Labour government plans new powers to intervene more quickly when private schools fail. But how many schools have not met standards, and why? Schools Week investigates ...

Private equity-owned independent special schools which charge councils fees of up to £131,000 a year are among hundreds that have failed Ofsted standards checks, Schools Week can reveal.

More than 250 non-associated private schools have failed to meet independent school standards in inspections carried out since September 2021, Schools Week analysis shows.

We found:

- Five private special schools owned by the Cambian Group – which posted a net profit of

£6.5 million in 2023 – failed independent schools standards checks in the past four years. Four of those schools were later found to meet standards in subsequent inspections.

- Private special schools made up more than two in five of those found to be failing. But, in some cases, councils continue to send vulnerable children to the institutions – including one where “staff respond to violence from pupils with further violence”.
- Faith schools that have failed consecutive inspections for as many as 10 years – but still remain.

- 84 schools that did not meeting independent school standards inspections on multiple occasions – almost a third. Overall, 46 have closed.

Labour's schools bill proposes to tighten regulation over schools failing such inspections. So which private schools have not met the standards, and why? Schools Week investigates...

## Schools fail, but investors make millions

Nine private special schools that have failed inspections since 2021 are owned by companies backed by private equity or sovereign wealth



# Investigation: Warning notices

funds.

In 2023, *Schools Week* exposed how these companies were making millions from the “bankrupt” SEND system.

Pontville School, an independent special school in Lancashire, is owned by the Witherslack Group, which runs 28 private special schools.

The company is owned by Mubadala Capital, a subsidiary of Abu Dhabi’s second-largest sovereign wealth fund.

On its website, Pontville boasts of “continued outstanding Ofsted results”. But, in December last year, an inspection found the school was failing to meet standards around the welfare and safety of pupils.

“A significant minority of pupils say that they do not feel safe at school,” inspectors noted. “Bullying, prejudiced behaviour, threats of violence and physical aggression are commonplace.”

Inspectors found there was evidence of some pupils being subjected to frequent restrictive physical interventions. One pupil had been placed in at least 80 holds over the past four months.

Incident reports, parental complaints and first-aid logs revealed that pupils had suffered “serious physical harm” during fights with other pupils.

“Some of these have led to pupils requiring multiple and ongoing surgery to repair the damage,” Ofsted wrote.

Staff members described a culture where “staff are responding to violence from pupils with further violence”.

Last year, the school charged annual fees of up to £116,000 for each day pupil.

Lancashire County Council paid Pontville School fees amounting to more than £386,000 in November, the month before the latest inspection. The council said it was “continuing to support the children currently in attendance” at the school.

Witherslack recorded a profit margin of 26.5 per cent in 2023, according to a report commissioned by the Local Government Association. That year, its income was £148 million.

A spokesperson for Witherslack said the safety and care of pupils was its “utmost priority”. The company “work[s] constantly to ensure our schools meet the highest standards of education, safeguarding and care”.

## ‘A significant minority of pupils say that they do not feel safe at school’



The company noted that each of its schools is rated as ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted. Pontville’s latest inspection was not graded, so it is still rated ‘good’.

“Witherslack Group acknowledges the findings of Ofsted’s recent inspection at Pontville School and has taken immediate action to address the inspection’s findings,” the spokesperson added.

“We will continue to provide additional support to the school and ensure that our action plan is quickly and fully implemented.”

### Five of firm’s schools didn’t meet standards

The Cambian Group, owned by CareTech, runs more than 20 special schools. In 2022, *The Times* reported the firm sent more than £2 million to its founders’ offshore company in the Caribbean. *Schools Week* previously reported the firm’s net profit at £6.5 million.

Five Cambian special schools have failed to reach independent school standards in at least one inspection since 2022, our analysis found.

Ofsted concerns included pupils’ frequent use of foul language and behaviour that could become “violent and aggressive” at one school.

At another, a “significant proportion” of students were “failing to integrate successfully”, leading to placement breakdowns. Safeguarding logs were “not always updated regularly enough” at another.

However, four of the five schools were found to meet all independent school standards at their most recent inspections.

Cambian said none of its schools were currently rated by Ofsted as ‘inadequate’. At the school which did not meet all standards at its most recent inspection, the company said “remedial action is underway and will be completed shortly.”

Two other schools have had action plans to address shortfalls accepted by the DfE and “again the remedial processes are well underway,” the

## ‘Animal welfare comes first’

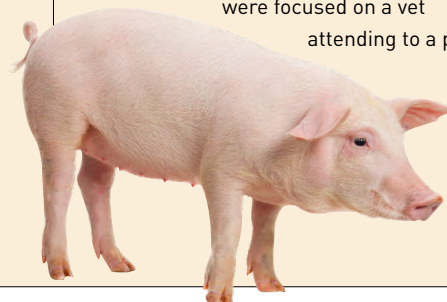
The only non-associated private school issued with a government “voluntary closure” notice in the past three years, according to documents provided to *Schools Week* by the DfE, was Sunflower Meadow Farm School outside Birmingham.

Located on a working farm, the school charged the DfE and local authority fees of up to £65,000 to enrol primary-aged children with special educational needs.

Shortly after the school opened, inspectors found an open slurry drain running through the grounds, pupils who were regularly physically restrained by

untrained staff, and teachers who had not been properly vetted.

“The headteacher openly stated to the lead inspector that ‘animal welfare comes first’,” inspectors wrote. “During the inspection, the headteacher and proprietor were focused on a vet attending to a pig.”



# Investigation: Warning notices

company added.

Private equity-owned schools which have failed to reach independent school standards in at least one inspection since 2021 include North Hill House school, owned by Aspris.

The company was set up by Waterland, a Dutch private equity firm, and runs 35 specialist schools and colleges in the UK as well as children's homes.

North Hill House failed to meet standards in 2020, 2022 and February 2024. But the school met all standards in its most recent inspection.

In 2024, inspectors concluded that the quality of education pupils received was "not good enough", and leadership in and management of the school was "inadequate".

In a statement, Aspris said it was "delighted" with its most recent inspection, carried out last December, which "shows the improvement journey of the school and demonstrates Aspris' commitment to ensuring high quality schools within our sector".

Michael Pearce, headteacher at North Hill House, said the school "remain[s] focused on continuing this positive momentum to provide the best possible learning environment for every child".

But a spokesperson for the Private Education Policy Forum (PEPF) said taxpayers would "rightly want to know why the SEND budget is lining the pockets of private equity firms" while some of their schools were found not to meet standards.

## Councils fund "risky" schools

Roughly 20 per cent of non-associated private schools failed to meet the independent school standards in 2023-24, Schools Week analysis shows.

Nearly half of the 2,500 independent schools in England are non-associated private schools. These do not have an umbrella organisation and are inspected by Ofsted rather than the Independent Schools Inspectorate.

A state capacity crisis has led to increasing numbers of pupils being placed in private special schools.

In Kent, Cornfields School, a special school with fees of £37,500 a year, went from "outstanding" in



## 'Staff are responding to violence from pupils with further violence'

2022 to failing on its quality of education, safety of pupils and suitability of staff – among other issues – last year. A second inspection in November found the school had slipped even further.

At that time, inspectors said the school's safeguarding and child protection policy was "not fit for purpose" and the school had not always ensured that adequate recruitment checks were done on staff who had lived and worked overseas.

They also said that, while "physical interventions" were used rarely, the staff's lack of expertise in when and how to use them was "placing pupils and staff at additional risk".

And, while local councils were referring SEND children to the school, inspectors found Cornfields was not allocating funding "appropriately" to meet the needs of its pupils' EHC plans. As a result, some were not getting access to specialist therapies or resources.

Cornfields School did not respond to a request for comment.

Kent County Council removed looked-after children in its care from the school in September, six months after concerns were first raised about Cornfields. A spokesperson told Kent Online that this was because it feared children were "at risk".

Nonetheless, in November, nine months after the school first failed a standards inspection, the council paid Cornfields £99,000 in fees.

A council spokesperson said it no longer places children at Cornfields.

The PEPF spokesperson added that "multiple governments have failed time and again to plan properly for special needs education.

"Private special-needs schools charge the taxpayer more than double the money of state special-needs schools on average, and so the situation is also draining the nation's education budget."

## Faith schools fail for years

Ofsted data shows that just under a third of all failing non-associated private schools were faith schools. However, faith schools made up nearly half of those that failed to reach standards over multiple inspections.

Government policy states that schools that do not meet the standards "must improve rapidly or face enforcement action, which may result in closure".

But Schools Week found some faith schools have failed to reach standards in consecutive inspections over eight, nine or 10 years.

Mechinoh School, an Orthodox Jewish school in Salford, Lancashire, has failed to meet independent school standards over eight consecutive inspections since March 2017.

Last year, inspectors found pupils were not acquiring sufficient knowledge of English, mathematics and other subjects, and were not studying for GCSEs. Beyond Year 10, students had no option but to continue with religious studies.

The building was in "a considerable state of disrepair"; a basement used as a social area for pupils was damp and its walls were "covered with mould".

Ofsted concluded that the school had "failed to resolve the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection" and that it in fact met fewer standards than it did in 2023.

The school did not respond to a request for comment.

# Investigation: Warning notices

Last year, the school received a warning letter requiring it to submit an action plan detailing how it would improve.

Failure to submit or implement an “adequate” plan can result in the government taking stronger “enforcement action”.

## Empty RSE classrooms

The government said its new schools bill measures will allow officials to “better secure the timely closure of institutions that, over time, are unable to fully meet the standards (often they will show some improvement then relapse)”.

It proposes a new power allowing ministers to immediately suspend a private school’s registration where children are at risk of harm. It also wants to expand what constitutes a private school and introduce a “fit and proper person” test for proprietors.

In London’s Stamford Hill, the Orthodox Jewish girls’ school Beis Ruchel D’Satmar London has failed to meet independent school standards over 10 consecutive inspections since 2016.

The school has received two government warning notices over the past three years. It was banned from admitting new pupils in 2019, but the restriction was lifted the following July after it made improvements.

Last year, inspectors found that school leaders did not allow the girls to learn about relationships and sex education, and “continued not to actively promote and encourage respect for other people, in particular, those with different faiths and beliefs”.

In some subjects, including science and geography, leaders did not allow pupils to study certain concepts, read content or complete tasks that went against the school’s religious beliefs.

A spokesperson said they were an “exemplary school”. But for, “religious and cultural reasons, we do not teach at school a certain few of the protected characteristics.

“We are often penalised for these faith values by Ofsted, who link these issues with the independent school standards.”

Many private faith schools included in Schools Week’s analysis were found to be failing standards

inspections primarily because they do not teach pupils about sex and relationships, or about people with protected characteristics: for example, those who are LGBTQ, transgender or in same-sex

## ‘These schools have been working within a culture of impunity’

marriages.

Some faith schools are adhering to government rules around RSE and health education by developing a suitable curriculum – but allowing parents to withdraw their children from those lessons.

At TTTY School, an Orthodox Jewish school in London, inspectors last year found that the school had developed a “suitable” RSE policy since its last inspection a year before.

“The school keeps records of pupils who have been withdrawn,” inspectors wrote. “This is currently all pupils”

The school did not respond to a request for

comment.

“These schools have been working within a culture of impunity,” said Michael Pyke, press officer at the Campaign for State Education. “They have been allowed to fail again and again. What we don’t know is why it has been allowed to happen.”

The PEPF spokesperson said the government should make clear to all schools with multiple failings that “the law is the law. All children must receive a good and safe education. If support to improve is not welcome, the schools must be shut without delay.”

James Whiting, general secretary of Socialist Educational Association, said the new schools bill provisions were “a step in the right direction”, but that more needs to be done.

He noted that failing state schools undergo forced academisation, but no such provision exists in the private sector.

The government said it only expects to use the new suspension powers against “very few schools”, roughly five per year.

A DfE spokesperson said all private schools must meet the independent school standards, and that “high and rising school standards are at the heart of our mission to break down barriers to opportunity and give every child the chance to achieve and thrive.”

### Seven of private AP firm’s 12 schools fail checks

Private alternative provision schools have also been found to fall below standards.

Seven out of 12 schools run by Progress Schools, an AP provider with schools across England, have failed independent school standards in inspections since 2021.

At one in 2023, inspectors found that the school had “low expectations of what some pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, can and should achieve”.

At another, in the same year, inspectors noted that teachers “do not have a good knowledge and understanding of the subjects that they teach”.

At a third, inspectors said simply that “leaders have failed pupils at this school”.

Four of the seven Progress schools reached independent school standards in their latest inspections.

A company spokesperson said they “choose to be a registered provider and face [independent school] standards, as we firmly believe all school settings should be regulated.

“But it can be challenging, as the needs of our students and nature of our settings don’t always fit with criteria primarily designed for the mainstream.”

Many of their pupils have been excluded or “do not attend due to mental health, trauma or challenges at home. We’re working hard to tick all the boxes in the current inspection system and lobbying for a new approach.”



Curriculum  
ConversationDO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
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AMBROSIChief executive, Baker Dearing  
Educational TrustHow to ensure the new  
curriculum boosts growth

**If Labour's opportunity mission is going to deliver its economic aims, then it's time the curriculum better supported routes into employment, writes Kate Ambrosi. Here's how.**

**T**he curriculum and assessment review is a unique opportunity to put a rocket booster under growth and to dismantle barriers to opportunity by linking education to employment.

We believe that reintroducing technical subjects before 16, linking education to workplace practice and designing the curriculum with employers will make schooling more equitable, engaging, and better at preparing young people for life.

**Bring back KS3 D&T**

First, there needs to be an improvement in how design and technology is treated at key stage 3.

The House of Lords committee on education for 11 to 16 year olds heard last year how the time set aside for design and technology in secondary schools had been narrowed to 40 minutes a week. The effect of this can be seen down the line, in the past decade's 68-per cent plummet in GCSE design and technology entries.

Progress 8 bears much of the blame, as schools have to concentrate resources on the eight subjects it includes to the detriment of others.

So now is the time for a reformed measure – Progress 5, perhaps – so schools have the time and impetus to better prioritise design and technology, and also data skills.

The University Technical Colleges (UTC) that Baker Dearing supports can demonstrate that starting students on a subject at an early age means they will stick with it: 59 per cent of our KS4 technical award entries are for engineering; 52 per cent of students take a Level 3 engineering course; and one-third of UTC leavers who go to university study engineering, compared to just five per cent nationally.

**Project-based learning**

To raise the standard for KS4, the government ought to consider how project-based learning, delivered with employers to bring real-life workplace challenges into the classroom, would develop students' skills and knowledge.

This approach presents an opportunity to develop more than technical skills: Having students work off briefs and present findings from their work can develop wider life skills, such as reading and oracy.

A real-life context also helps students envisage themselves in work, which is vital for engaging those from disadvantaged backgrounds and students who have become disengaged from learning.

Last year's UTC student



“ **Business should have a much greater role**

survey, completed by more than 10,000 learners, found that over 90 per cent want employer experiences, including projects, to gain employability skills such as communication, teamwork, confidence and problem solving.

Such an approach is already in widespread use across a number of other Western countries, including the Netherlands, the USA and Denmark.

**Employers directing curriculum**

Project-based learning will also require employer involvement and business should have a much greater role in the delivery of education, including the design of the curriculum.

Young people are increasingly choosing technical A-levels in the hope of improved career opportunities and the government's industrial strategy is clear that the skills system must be more responsive to business needs.

Employers must guide provision so students are taught the skills and knowledge that will help them progress to apprenticeships and work where they are needed, namely the high-growth sectors named in the industrial strategy.

**Locally-led learning**

Schools can make a start on engaging employers by using local skills improvement plans to map out their local industries and skills shortages. Metro mayors, who have long desired a greater role in education, could then facilitate links between industry and schools.

The government should encourage employer-school links by promoting employer-led activities such as mentoring and project-based learning, by training more specialist teachers, and through capital funding for schools to purchase industry-standard equipment.

However, teaching staff also need the means to deliver T Levels. At a rough estimate, 300 employers are now involved with T Levels through UTCs and 1,000 UTC students are studying a T Level course, including the foundation year.

A broad and balanced curriculum and employer-led project-based learning will involve hard choices. It is not a simple change. But we believe a more tactile learning experience, informed by real life, will drive growth and give students every opportunity possible.

## Opinion

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CHRIS  
KIRK

Director, CJK Associates

## Trust centralisation can't be judged on numbers alone

**Centralisation is about delivering more bang for your buck, and the numbers show that's exactly what well-structured trusts do, explains Chris Kirk**

**S**pending more on central teams does not inherently mean that trusts are diverting money away from teaching and learning.

The recent *Schools Week* article, *Academy Trust Central Teams Gobble Up £200m*, raises an important question: does centralisation in academy trusts drive up costs, or does it actually save money? The reality is far more nuanced.

The key issue is not where the money sits (central or local) but whether the overall end-to-end cost is lower, and whether the trust is providing better services as a result. In other words, are trusts delivering more for less?

Consider a trust with a minimal top slice, just enough to cover the statutory roles of the chief executive and financial officers. This looks cost-effective on paper. Schools retain control over their own budgets and purchase what they need individually.

Now, let's compare this to a trust with a higher top slice, which may be perceived as less efficient because it appears to be taking more money

away from teaching and learning.

What if this trust is paying for almost everything which is non-teaching: heating, lighting, insurance, catering, health and safety, governance, IT, HR, estates and finance support?

And what if these items cost less because the trust has negotiated better discounts with suppliers, shared the costs of more expensive staff and invested in smart systems and automated workflows?

In this model, schools are not losing money; they are benefitting from centrally-negotiated cost efficiencies, accessing professional expertise that they might not afford individually, and freeing school leaders from non-teaching responsibilities.

As one CEO of a trust of between five and 10 schools told me recently: "Centralising our operational functions has worked really well, and we have no desire to return to the old systems."

Headteachers see the value in the specialist expertise they can draw on, he explained, and there are more opportunities for career development, positioning the trust well for long-term success.

Where centralisation is done well, our CJK Aurora data shows that the cost of the service when assessed on a 'like-for-like' per-pupil basis tends to be lower.



“ The goal is not just about saving money

In highly centralised trusts (with an 80-per cent or more level of centralisation), average per-pupil end-to-end costs are typically 10 to 15 per cent lower than in decentralised trusts. In fact, they can be as much as 40 per cent lower.

However, centralisation is not a panacea. Shared finance services are not always more efficient. For example, our benchmarking data also shows that smaller trusts with mainly secondary schools can be efficient if they are happy to leave most finance activity at school level and limit themselves to a very small central team.

In short, a well-structured trust empowers headteachers to focus on education while ensuring operational efficiency. The goal is not just about saving money, it's about doing things better and ultimately ensuring that every pound spent enhances outcomes for pupils.

This highlights some key challenges:

First, centralisation does not automatically save money; it must be carefully designed and managed.

Next, some activities are best

delivered locally. A one-size-fits-all approach can be inefficient if it removes flexibility where schools need it most.

Avoiding duplication is also crucial. If trusts are not careful, central teams may end up replicating tasks that are still being handled at school level.

And clear accountability is essential. Lack of clarity about who does what can leave school leaders feeling frustrated, believing they are paying more to the centre while still carrying the same operational burden.

Finally, service quality matters. Central teams must be held to high service standards. If schools feel underserved, resentment towards centralisation can build.

In sum, academy trusts should not be judged by how much they spend on their central teams, but by what they achieve with that investment.

A trust that strikes the right balance – eliminating waste, enhancing service quality and ensuring that every pound is spent wisely – will be one that truly delivers the best for its pupils.

# Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
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## GAVIN BOOTH

CEO, Infinity Academies Trust

### Why more schools should be courting the media spotlight

**Recent experience has changed my mind about the value of engaging with the media, explains Gavin Booth. The sector should take the initiative on telling its story**

As a sector, we tend to keep our focus on what we need to improve for our children and communities. Invariably, that means we spend little time challenging narratives centred on what we can't or don't do, allowing these to dominate the airwaves.

Over recent months, the team at Infinity Academies and I have decided we want to change that. To that end, we let the BBC spend days filming life in one of our primary schools in Boston, Lincs.

The resulting headline, *We don't just teach – we clothe the kids, feed them and brush their teeth* rightly showcases the lengths we go to in ensuring our children are ready to learn.

I am not going to lie. We had sleepless nights pondering whether engaging with the media in this way was the right thing to do. Even when it was all happening, it was a strange and unnerving feeling seeing and hearing our school, our staff and

our pupils on everything from the World at One to the Six O'Clock News.

That said, the most interesting thing for us was not the headlines or the coverage itself – it was the incredible response.

One week later, we had received over £17,000 in donations from individuals from St Mirren football club to Malta. We have been offered pallets of toiletries, free teaching resources, lots of play equipment – and the amount of knitted goods we have received in the post has been incredible.

In addition, hundreds of people have written to us and simply said 'thank you' for doing all that we do. It made the pupils at St Nicholas' CE Primary Academy, many of whom face significant challenges in their home lives, feel noticed and valued. The smiles on their faces have been huge.

In a world where we are the people who are usually planning what is being taught, it would be fair to say that I was the one who was given a lesson by all of this.

We often see what we do in our schools as the norm. We sometimes just do things because we know that no one else will if we don't. Yet, and I had lost sight of this, all the



**“ We need to do more to be our own champions**

additional things schools do are hugely valued by and valuable to our communities.

We forget that at our own peril, particularly when the number of complaints coming to schools seems to be endless at the moment.

Something made someone in Scotland go to the effort of writing a letter and sending a cheque to a school over 300 miles away in rural Lincolnshire. What is it?

We are not doing anything that is hugely different from any other school in the country. We don't have access to funding that other schools don't. The only thing we've done differently was to take a gulp and put ourselves out there.

For me, the roller-coaster we've been on in the past week is a sign that we need to do things differently as a sector. It feels unnatural, but what might be the benefits of collectively showcasing what we do?

Politicians are well aware that education polls as a low priority among the public. But is it really? And what is our role in that?

Getting on the front foot in the media could help engage the next generation of teachers. It could unlock greater support from businesses and agencies.

Celebrating the real story of what our schools do every day for our communities might even help turn the tide of complaints we are all being inundated by.

In short, we need to do more to be our own champions.

Two weeks ago, I would have said that it is better not to stick our heads above the parapet. Now my view has changed. I am not saying I want our schools on BBC Breakfast every week, but I will spend more time shouting about what we do to support our communities.

You should too.



## Opinion

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GEORGINA  
DURRANT

National inclusion lead, Twinkl,  
author and former SENDCO

## Five reforms the SEND inquiry must deliver

**Creating a system that meets the needs of all learners will require training, new incentives, support, guidance and investment, writes Georgina Durrant**

In December, the education select committee launched a much-needed inquiry into the provision of education for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Given this represents one-fifth of all children and young people, and that the education secretary herself has described our SEND system as “neglected to the point of crisis”, fixing it is not just an educational priority but a moral imperative.

Bridget Phillipson appears to recognise this, promising reforms that will create a system where all children “belong” and can “achieve and thrive”. To create this inclusive educational environment that truly meets the diverse needs of all learners, comprehensive and impactful reforms are required.

Here are the five changes that would have the biggest impact.

### Mandatory SEND training

According to Ofsted, only one-third of teachers have received SEND training since April 2021. With the numbers of children and young people with SEND increasing each year, there is a clear argument for mandatory SEND training for all

educators.

This is essential to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to support students effectively. Training should be regularly updated to keep pace with new developments and best practices in the field.

### Hold LAs to account

The number of applications for education, healthcare needs assessments (EHCNAs) are increasing, as are education, health and care plans (EHCPs).

Local authorities are required to finalise EHCPs as soon as practicable, but within 20 weeks of the initial request for assessment. However, in 2023, only half of EHCPs were issued within the statutory deadline.

This delay in providing essential support can have a detrimental impact on the wellbeing and progress of children with SEND. To address this, stricter regulation and oversight are needed to ensure local authorities meet their obligations promptly.

Implementing clear consequences for failing to meet deadlines could drive improvements in the timeliness of EHCPs.

### Access to external professionals

More than 40,000 children were waiting for more than 12 weeks for speech and language therapy as of June 2024. Improving access to external professionals such as speech and language therapists,



“ It must be followed by decisive action

occupational therapists and other specialists is critical.

These professionals play a vital role in providing timely early identification and support. To reduce waiting times, investment in recruiting and retaining these professionals is necessary, as well as ensuring schools know how to access them.

### Robust careers education

According to the NHS, only 5.1 per cent of adults with a learning disability known to their local authority are in paid work. Establishing a strong careers system that targets disadvantaged groups is essential.

This system should provide opportunities for work experience, apprenticeships and connections with local businesses to help young people with SEND transition successfully into adulthood.

Providing careers guidance and mentoring can also help build confidence and skills needed for the workforce.

### A better deal for staff

Teaching assistants are the backbone of inclusive education, providing essential support to both teachers

and students. Yet their average annual salary in 2024 was £15,476 due to pro-rata contracts.

This pay inadequacy has led many to leave the profession, resulting in a significant impact on the support available for pupils with SEND. Improving their pay and working conditions is crucial to retain skilled TAs and attract new ones to the profession.

SEND coordinators also face enormous pressures. In a recent Twinkl survey of over 350 SENDCOs, 80 per cent had either resigned or considered quitting in the last term due to the pressures of the role.

Providing adequate support, training and recognition for SENDCOs is vital to ensure they can effectively lead and coordinate provision in schools.

The committee's inquiry is a step in the right direction, but it must be followed by decisive action and investment to bring about meaningful change.

These five reforms are necessary to create an inclusive and supportive educational environment for children with SEND. By addressing these key areas, we can begin to ensure that all students have the opportunity to thrive.

## Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
CONTACT US [NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK](mailto:NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK)

PRITESH  
RAICHURA

Assistant principal and  
science teacher, Ark  
Soane Academy



JOSH  
GOODRICH

Author,  
*Responsive Coaching and*  
CEO, Steplab



## We need a better recruitment story than the 'born teacher'

**Our reliance on the attractively simple idea that teaching is an innate skillset is off-putting and misleading. We should be more honest about its demands – and rewards**

The idea that being a great teacher is somehow innate is attractive by its simplicity. But it is wrong, and it is arguably intensely unattractive to those who don't identify with it, putting many talented people off from entering the profession.

Yes, some may begin their careers with certain natural attributes, such as high emotional intelligence, a curious mindset and an ability to connect with young people. But that is far from the whole package. Great teaching is not instinctive; it is built over time.

In part, the myth of the 'born teacher' appeals because we think telling people that teaching is one of the most complex and demanding professions will scare them away. But isn't it worse to start under a false pretence only to discover the deep commitment it requires? Might that not explain why so many leave so early?

Instead, might we not be better off highlighting the satisfaction of guiding a class to overcome a difficult concept, the joy of helping young people develop resilience and ambition, and the intellectual

challenge of constantly refining our practice?

Both of us found teaching difficult at first. We struggled in those early years, grappling with the challenge of maintaining high expectations while adapting to the diverse needs of our students.

But through deliberate practice, expert guidance and continuous reflection, we refined our skills and grew in confidence. What other occupation can compete with such professional growth?

Teaching is hard, but it is an intellectually stimulating profession. The best teachers are constantly refining their explanations, adapting their strategies and shaping and reshaping cultures where learning is its own reward.

It is immensely rewarding and endlessly intriguing, and the reality is that the process of becoming an expert takes time and deliberate effort. In schools where leaders create nurturing conditions and where colleagues challenge and support each other, there is no job like it.

Teaching is a privilege because of the deep relationships we build. Getting to know our students – their ambitions, challenges, and perspectives – is one of the most fulfilling aspects of the job. It allows us to guide them not just academically but also in developing confidence, resilience and a strong



“Great teachers are not born; they are made

sense of self.

This kind of teaching excellence is not abstract; it has real, measurable impact.

Take Pritesh's remarkable achievement of guiding an entire class of 31 pupils in a comprehensive school with a high proportion of disadvantaged students to achieve the top grade of 9-9 in GCSE combined science.

That is the impact teachers can have when they master their craft with precision, purpose and unwavering dedication. Such success is not accidental; it is the result of years of honing practice, and that's a much better narrative arc than 'Mr Raichura was just born with it'.

Pritesh believes his students can achieve great things. By holding that belief unwaveringly, he not only leaves them no other option than to rise to it, he leaves himself no option but to find the best ways to help them do so.

Transformational teaching like this should be at the core of our education system, demonstrating

that with the right support, every teacher has the potential to deliver life-changing outcomes.

Instead, public perceptions of teaching remain stubbornly low. Steplab's recent research reveals that 42 per cent of British adults see teaching as an unappealing career choice.

Is that surprising given how the profession is framed as stressful and unsustainable rather than fulfilling and intellectually rich?

Yes, teaching is challenging, but anything worth doing is. The thrill of seeing students grow, succeed, and develop as individuals is unlike anything else.

And no, great teachers are not simply born; they are made. This means we get the thrill of continually growing, succeeding and developing ourselves thanks to expert training, a commitment to learning and a culture that recognises and values our growth.

If we can change the way teaching is understood, we might just inspire the next generation of great educators.

# SEND Solutions

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
CONTACT US [NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK](mailto:NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK)



## TONI HENNESSY

Learning mentor, St Mary of the Angels Catholic Primary School

## Practical steps to embed early intervention

**Equipping pupils with the tools and support to manage their wellbeing has transformed mental health in and around our school, says Toni Hennessy**

Our infrastructure to support early intervention has not kept pace with society's growing openness to addressing young people's mental health challenges. This gap leaves too many entering adulthood without the tools to manage their emotions effectively.

The consequences of this shortfall are stark. Demand for child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) has surged, with over 270,300 young people on waiting lists in 2022-23 alone.

At St Mary of the Angels, we have embedded early intervention strategies into everyday practice, and the results are transforming wellbeing for our whole community. Here's how.

### A safe and inclusive environment

Creating an atmosphere where children feel valued and safe is essential. Inclusive language, celebrating diversity and encouraging open expression all help children feel secure.

All of this depends on our staff's own wellbeing. For this, they need regular training, shared values and practices that are consistent with these aims.

We train and equip all our staff

to model empathy and active listening, but we go further still. They all receive mental health first aid training so that they can recognise the early signs that a child might be struggling, and know what to do when it happens.

Predictable routines are also crucial to creating that safe environment. They provide stability and reduce anxiety. Structured school days help, but we must be explicit about those structures. We do this by communicating daily schedules clearly and providing consistency wherever possible.

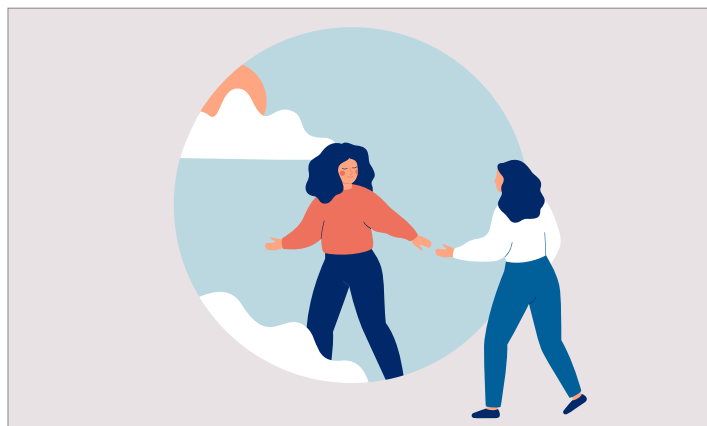
### A curriculum for wellbeing

Of course, we marked last week's Children's Mental Health Week, and this week's Safer Internet Day. Regular assemblies are important in reinforcing our year-round work to embed emotional literacy as a core part of our consistent routines.

Through simple, effective activities like journaling, storytelling or emotion charts, these sessions allow children to recognise and articulate their emotions.

They also complement our whole-school PSHE programme, which focuses on the science of mental health, helping children understand how their brains work during different emotional states.

But to properly reduce stigma and encourage children to seek support, we must go further than taught lessons. So we use circle time and



## “ The impact is clear across our community

one-on-one mentoring sessions to facilitate open conversations about emotions and mental wellbeing.

We also incorporate tools for managing our emotions into our daily practices. We use mindfulness techniques such as deep breathing and guided imagery before lessons or after breaks to help children regulate their emotions and manage stress.

### Beyond the school gates

That said, some pupils still mask so well that they can fall under the radar. So we've made our radar more powerful. To increase our alertness without increasing workload, we are using an AI tool to help identify pupils' needs and target early support.

This means our pupils are able to access support outside of school too, and it plays an important role in making sure families are actively participating in the effort.

We know parents are critical partners in early intervention, so we provide them with regular communication, workshops and accessible resources to empower them to support their child's emotional development.

Sometimes, all of this work is still not enough to prevent mental health challenges from escalating.

But early identification means our collaboration with mental health professionals is more likely to result in timely and effective intervention.

### On the front foot

The impact of these strategies is clear across the school and our community.

Pupils have gained resilience, developed self-regulation skills and experienced improved relationships. Teachers report fewer behavioural challenges and more positive classroom environments. And parents say they feel better equipped to support their children, strengthening family dynamics.

The most revolutionary aspect for us has been AI's power to help get this right for the children, all while reducing the burden on our teachers and helping with their wellbeing too.

With the government's new AI plan, there is a genuine opportunity to ensure high-quality early identification and intervention become the norm in schools.

But with evidence of impact like this, why wait for Whitehall? Investing in early intervention is investing in our collective future, and schools can start feeling the benefits today.



## THE CONVERSATION

### LISTENING IN ON THE DIGITAL STAFFROOM



**Zara Simpson**

Deputy head of prep, Streatham and Clapham High School

## GROW YOUR OWN

Amid a generalised youth mental health crisis, understanding your individual needs as a young person can be challenging, but it is essential. So this year's theme for Children's Mental Health Week, 'Know yourself, grow yourself' was apt.

As always, a wealth of resources was available, but a few particularly stood out to me this year. Among the best, the official children's mental health week website offered a strong range, from assembly slides to fundraising packs, all designed to help schools not just for the week but all year round.

Beyond resources, I've been inspired by how schools are bringing this year's theme to life. Gayhurst School used journal writing with year 3 pupils and Sheerhatch Primary welcomed a yoga teacher to guide pupils through strategies to quieten the mind.



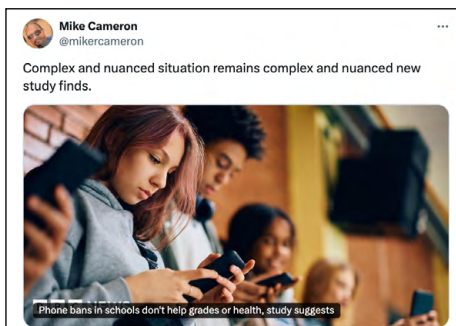
There are so many brilliant ways to support young people's mental health, including practical strategies, engaging activities and meaningful conversations. But none are perhaps as impactful as tailoring our PSHE curriculum and designing warm, supportive learning environments.

## A COMPLEX WEB

But should designing supportive learning environments mean banning phones in school? Hot off the heels of Children's Mental Health Week last week, this week marks Safer Internet Day, and the University of Birmingham's SMART Schools study managed to mark both with a report that's made a bit of a splash.

The BBC reported on the findings, which suggest that mobile phone bans in schools result in no significant impact on behaviour or attainment. Cue: heated online debate. On one side, those who rail against ineffective 'draconian' policies. On the other, those who argue it's not enough and we should follow Australia by banning social media for under-16s.

Teacher Mike Cameron offered what was perhaps the most balanced perspective.



For me, the important thing is to remember that we can help pupils navigate the digital world. To that end, the UK Safer Internet Centre offers webinars for teachers and professionals to make the most of Safer Internet Day, and Webwise, an online safety initiative of the Department for Education and co-funded by the European Commission, offers a plethora of resources.

I see no contradiction in teaching our young people how digital devices can enhance their learning while also confronting their obvious drawbacks.

## AI ON THE PRIZE

The same is true for teachers and AI. As the Girls' Day School Trust develops its AI

policy, I found this blog by the Good Schools Guide featuring an interview with AI and edtech experts Adam Webster and Lex Lang particularly insightful.

Here, the pair set out how the tools they have developed are transforming education at Caterham School. They make a compelling case for teachers learning to use it effectively to support their practice, but never shy away from the need for caution.

## ENGAGING WITH THE WORLD

For all their risks, new technologies also empower us to engage with our communities in exciting ways. So while the sector celebrated this week as Google conceded to a headteacher's campaign to remove all school reviews from its search engine, and as the government and others lined up to take the fight to online trolls attacking education staff, we were preparing to launch a podcast to reach out to our stakeholders.

In this, we were inspired by Whittle Academy's new podcast, *Soar Beyond*, which features students, staff and parents sharing their voices, celebrating success and striving for excellence together.

I also enjoyed this blog by Lily Staff, English Lead at Reach Academy Hanworth Park, on working with families to drive up reading outside of school, and why it really matters.

New technologies also make the world a smaller place, so that the world becomes our community.

We were recently awarded the British Council's prestigious International School Award for our work in bringing the world into the classroom. For schools looking to establish a similar international disposition, their UK-Ukraine School Partnerships initiative is worth exploring.

The programme pairs UK schools with those in Ukraine, offering a unique opportunity to collaborate across borders. The application deadline is February 28, so now is the time to engage.



Click the links to access the blogs and podcasts



# The Knowledge

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



## How AI can build confidence in inspections

**Matt Davis, Global managing director, Etio**

As John Jerrim noted in these pages last week, the reliability of Ofsted's proposed new grading system is not yet guaranteed, and it is high-stakes for the inspectorate. It is crucial for building confidence in the consistency and fairness of the school review process – a challenge faced by education systems across the globe.

Research from our work in the Middle East shows artificial intelligence holds the potential to be transformative in this regard. Our findings suggest that its judicious use can enhance the quality, validity and reliability of inspections.

We have been testing the feasibility of AI in school reviews through a series of over 150 laboratory simulations and a small-scale field test, using the United Arab Emirates' inspection framework.

Our trials have shown AI can accelerate many of the processes, enhance the breadth, depth and triangulation of evidence and potentially help guide novice inspectors through inspections.

We believe that an approach which allows more time for experts to evaluate to the best of their abilities promises greater reliability and validity of judgments.

The sheer volume of information inspectors must process in a limited time is significant. Indeed, one of the concerns that has been raised about Ofsted's report cards is that inspectors will need to assess a larger set of performance categories within the same time period.

From our trials, we can see that the time savings AI can provide are substantial, reducing tasks which can take hours to seconds.

For example, synthesising large amounts of messy data and providing summaries for different audiences during the inspection process are currently time-consuming tasks which can with care be largely automated.

Every hour taken away from these tasks during inspection is an hour which can be spent refining the team's understanding of each provider's context.

The model we developed also helps analyse the quality of the evidence base during the inspection, triangulating the emerging data



### 'There is a strong case for implementing the technology now'

against the relevant framework and accurately identifying how the evidence stacks up against a judgment. It flags areas that warrant additional attention from the inspectors, ensuring a more thorough and therefore more accurate evaluation.

As with AI in search engine results, it is possible to quickly drill down from the AI's conclusions to the evidence it has drawn on. We argue that this improves the traceability of evidence in inspections, in turn helping to increase transparency and trust in the judgment and the inspection system itself.

We have also begun to explore how this technology can be adapted to support inspection teams in real-time. An AI assistant-type application might help steer inexperienced inspectors through the procedural steps of inspection, as well as directing attention to specific areas of the evidence base.

This allows different choices in resourcing. Inspectors who are not specialists in a particular subject or phase can access real-time prompts and contextual information courtesy of AI. This means all areas of a school's performance can be evaluated rigorously and fairly, regardless of the individual expertise of the inspection team.

Equally, it might allow domain specialists with limited inspection experience to examine aspects such as inclusion and wellbeing in depth without risking the overall inspection quality.

We have developed a clear way forward for AI in school reviews and are excited by its enormous potential to enhance quality, efficiency and fairness.

The promising results from these experimental trials suggest that while further research is needed to understand how AI-driven inspections perform in different school contexts and under varied accountability frameworks, there is a strong case for implementing the technology now.

While nascent, we strongly believe that there is a huge amount of potential for AI to enhance the quality and impact of school inspections.

This isn't about AI replacing human judgment. It is about creating the time and opportunity for inspectors to engage with school teams and to really understand the nuance of each context.

There is therefore an opportunity for Ofsted (and school inspectors across the world) to consider the opportunities to continue to enhance and improve inspection experiences.



Week in

# Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

## MONDAY

It has been almost two months since the children's wellbeing and schools bill first came before Parliament and the government still seems to be getting confused over what it actually states.

Skills minister Jacqui Smith was forced to write to Tory peer Simone Finn on Monday to correct parts of a statement she had made in the Lords.

Finn had suggested the bill "scraps the requirement for failing schools to become academies", but Smith insisted "we are not scrapping sponsored conversion".

Smith has now been forced to say she had "understood you as meaning the government will no longer require failing schools to become academies".

"I understand, however, the point you were making was that the bill removes the duty on government to order failing maintained schools to become academies. In this you are correct."

This bodes well for the bill's remaining stages!

## TUESDAY

The final day of the bill's committee stage debates saw yet more Labour and Tory bickering over whether mobile phones should be banned in schools.

Some time was spent discussing the exact definition of a "smartphone" and how it differs from a "mobile phone".

"As somebody who was born in the 1980s and grew up in the 1990s, I see mobile telephones as typically restricted to SMS – I think that is what the kids call it these days – voice calls and maybe an alarm," said Labour MP Tom Hayes.

"A smartphone is something far more advanced, which has destructive social media, addictive apps, games and the like."

Tory MP Neil O'Brien pointed out there was no reason why even a "dumbphone" with only text functions cannot cause "massive distraction" if it is out in class.

There were even accusations that a proposed Conservative amendment could result in teachers' phones being banned too, followed by replies criticising such "lawyerly arguments" (surely not such a bad thing while literally making the law).

MPs spent over 45 minutes on the subject. Talk about being distracted!

## WEDNESDAY

Rumours are swirling that Keir Starmer is eyeing up a Cabinet reshuffle. No10 sources have firmly denied the claims.

But, according to The i Paper, Labour insiders say those close to the PM are in the early stages of planning the reshuffle, and it could take place in the late spring or early summer.

Sources told the newspaper that Bridget Phillipson is in the firing line, along with culture secretary Lisa Nandy and attorney general Richard Hermer.

The newspaper said the education secretary's handling of Ofsted reforms and the private schools VAT changes have left some questioning her position.

\*

The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) has said it "aim[s] to provide details of how we will support local authorities and schools with the increase in employer National Insurance

contributions in March 2025".

National funding formula allocations – used to calculate school budgets – will be sent out at the end of March.

So the ESFA's cutting it rather fine for LAs and schools that will be waiting with bated breath to find out what support they'll get to help cover the NI hike.

\*

The Department for Education is not known for its punctuality when it comes to freedom of information requests. So you can imagine our shock at *Schools Week Towers* when we received one back in less than a week (the deadline is 20 working days).

Which FOI was that, you ask? One showing the DfE's minutes of the fiery meeting between the education secretary and controversial headteacher Katharine Birbalsingh.

We can't imagine why ministers would want that out there!

## THURSDAY

United Learning CEO Jon Coles took to X to bemoan how, these days, the greatest divide in public life seems to be "between those who want rational discussion where there is disagreement and those who want immediately to shout abuse".

"We have no society if we cannot have reasoned disagreement," he philosophised.

This cryptic tweet came just hours after *Schools Week* published details of the Birbalsingh minutes. Coincidence?



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## Headteacher

**Location:** Stevenage, Hertfordshire

**Pay range:** L28 - L39 (£96,673 - £126,517)

**Start date:** September 2025

**Closing date:** 10th March 2025 @ 9am

The Nobel School in Stevenage is seeking an inspirational Headteacher to lead our vibrant, inclusive secondary school and sixth form. We pride ourselves on fostering academic excellence, personal growth, and a strong sense of community. Our values of inclusivity, ambition, and belonging shape a supportive environment where both students and staff can thrive.

We are looking for an experienced, visionary leader who embodies these values, inspires ambition, and promotes well-being. The successful candidate will collaborate with staff, students, and Governors to build on our successes and shape the school's future.

In return, we offer a dynamic, supportive community, modern facilities, flexible working opportunities, professional development, and a competitive salary.

To arrange a visit to the school, contact Suzanne Crow at [suzanne.crow@nobel.herts.sch.uk](mailto:suzanne.crow@nobel.herts.sch.uk). Apply via Teach in Herts.

We welcome joint Co-Headship applications and are committed to safeguarding and diversity.

[Click to apply](#)



## Principal, Ipswich Academy

**Leadership Pay Scale**

**L25 - L31 £89,830 - £104,040 per annum.**

Paradigm Trust is looking to appoint a principal into the team at Ipswich Academy. You'll be joining a Trust that is committed to developing and sustaining great schools to make the biggest difference for pupils. It's a place where we work together, helping each other to make sure every child can reach their potential.

The school has an unrelenting focus on supporting and challenging pupils to achieve academic success, while also enjoying a broad and balanced curriculum.

This is a great opportunity for a highly motivated, ambitious professional who wants to make an impact. Leaders at Paradigm Trust are committed to changing children's lives through continuing growth and commitment to excellence and the successful candidate will therefore have the inspiration and drive to ensure Ipswich Academy provides an excellent education to its pupils.



[Click to apply](#)



## Executive Deputy Headteacher

**Salary Range - Leadership Point 7 - 11 (£57,831 - £63,815)**

**Start date:** April 2025. The position is Full Time.

St Marys Church of England Primary School are working in partnership with Downham Church of England Primary School and have an exciting opportunity for a dynamic, passionate and enthusiastic Executive Deputy Headteacher to join our team to provide additional leadership capacity to our schools.

The role will be shared between both schools, but predominantly based at Downham Church of England Primary.

This strategic role requires senior leadership experience and the ability to work in a wide range of roles which will include being the Designated Child Protection and Safeguarding Lead (DSL) and Special Educational Need and Disability Co-ordinator (SENDCO).

For an informal discussion about the role, please contact Lisa Perry 01268 464759.

We welcome visits to the school prior to application.



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# CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

INSPIRATION EXCELLENCE PARTNERSHIP



Extol Trust is seeking an outstanding CEO to deliver our mission to provide stand-out education for every child.

At the heart of our vision for education is a self-improving school-led system which has the best evidence-led practice and in which every child thrives and achieves through the opportunities provided.

We are seeking an outstanding CEO with a strong belief in, and commitment to, the Trust's vision and values, who is able to demonstrate them daily throughout every aspect of the role and refresh and re-articulate them as the Trust evolves and grows.

#### About You:

As CEO, the successful candidate will work closely with the Board and wider long-standing Trust leadership to develop, renew and implement our Trust strategy, including future growth. You will be able to function at both a local and national level as an excellent ambassador for Extol through our engagement with a wide range of partners, and with our school communities.

Able to inspire and motivate others, even when things are tough, you will embody a visible and immersive leadership style, with intimate knowledge of the Trust's schools and operations and be an active presence throughout the school year.

You will value and support rigour, efficiency and ongoing development of finance, IT, estates and other operational services, and will be constantly looking for opportunities for innovation and improvement.

In line with our Trust ethos and values, you will have the capacity to invigorate and empower our talented Trust community of staff and stakeholders through devolved networking, ensuring inclusive decision-making across the Trust.

#### We can offer you:

- A supportive and collaborative culture with staff, Trustees and the CEO working closely together, with wellbeing and personal growth engrained in our culture.
- A highly focused professional workforce with a relentless drive for improved educational outcomes.
- A financially robust Trust with a proven track record of strong management from a highly regarded Trust Central Team.
- Significant investment in professional infrastructure to ensure the Trust is an employer of choice.
- Opportunities for professional development and growth within a dynamic and expanding Trust.
- A culture of rigorous governance and evidence-based practices driving continuous improvement.

If you have a proven track record in education leadership, a commitment to demonstrating the highest standards in all areas of professional life and share our belief in the power of education and learning to transform children's life chances and choices, then we would love to hear from you.

## Contact us

For further information about our opportunity, please visit our dedicated recruitment microsite – [www.nyresourcing.co.uk/extol-trust-chief-executive-officer](http://www.nyresourcing.co.uk/extol-trust-chief-executive-officer)

For an informal, confidential conversation about the role please call Helen Poole on **01609 532254** or email [Helen.Poole@northyorks.gov.uk](mailto:Helen.Poole@northyorks.gov.uk)

Alternatively contact Leanne Auton on **07815 028 548** or email [Leanne.Auton@northyorks.gov.uk](mailto:Leanne.Auton@northyorks.gov.uk)

Helen and Leanne have been engaged to support us with recruitment to this exciting opportunity.



## PRINCIPAL BARCLAY ACADEMY

PAY GRADE: ENGLAND LEADERSHIP | EL31 - EL37  
STEVENAGE, HERTFORDSHIRE



### About the role

Barclay Academy is seeking a dynamic and visionary leader to serve as its next Principal. As the educational leader of the school, the Principal will guide staff and students toward academic success, community engagement, and holistic development in a collaborative and inclusive environment. The successful candidate will play a pivotal role in leading the school forward into the next stage of its development, building on the strong foundation and values already in place.

**Staff benefits:** Future Academies recognises its employees as the most important asset and critical to its success. To demonstrate this all staff are offered the following benefits:

- A supportive ethos and concern for the well-being of all colleagues.
- Excellent CPD opportunities and career progression.
- Employer Contributions to Local Government or Teachers Pension Scheme.
- Mintago – access to numerous cost saving employee benefits including fantastic cost savings on childcare.
- Employee Assistance Programme.
- Access to a Virtual GP

Should you wish to visit the school prior to submitting your application, please email [HRenquiries@futureacademies.org](mailto:HRenquiries@futureacademies.org) and a member of the central HR team will coordinate a visit for you. Alternatively, should you wish to have a confidential discussion about the role, you can email HR who will gladly coordinate this for you, or you can contact Ben Keely, Secondary Director directly via email - [ben.keely@futureacademies.org](mailto:ben.keely@futureacademies.org)

[CLICK HERE FOR MORE INFO](#)



## HEADTEACHER

An exciting opportunity for an exceptional leader to make a real difference in the lives of our pupils, their families, our staff and the wider community at Strathmore School. Strathmore is a happy, thriving, oversubscribed, unique and growing special academy for children and young people aged 4-19 with severe and complex learning difficulties including those with an additional diagnosis of autism and/or physical/sensory disabilities. Uniquely, pupils attend one of four campuses, each co-located with inclusive minded mainstream schools.

Strathmore is part of The Auriga Academy Trust, a small special school Trust based in Richmond Upon Thames. Our small size means that our three schools collaborate very closely, knowing that together we can offer more to our pupils. We are committed to creating an inclusive environment where every pupil, staff member, and stakeholder is valued, respected, and empowered to thrive. We actively promote equality, celebrate diversity, and challenge all forms of discrimination and inequality. Headteachers will be role models for inclusive leadership, fostering a culture where difference is embraced, barriers to learning and participation are removed, and everyone has the opportunity to succeed.

*We are committed to encouraging further growth from diverse groups and we welcome applications from currently underrepresented groups.*

*We currently have an underrepresentation from the global majority at leadership.*

Leading a school is always a challenge and Strathmore's unique circumstances means leading here requires someone with a particular set of skills. We need someone who is passionate about working in a special school, someone committed to developing their staff as well as themselves.

By joining the Auriga Academy Trust and providing inspiring leadership to Strathmore School, you will benefit from a committed, mutually supportive team, both within your school and across the Trust, sharing best practice, resources and benefitting from economies of scale.

Strathmore School is committed to the safeguarding and welfare of its pupils and expects all staff to share this commitment. All applicants are subject to an Enhanced Disclosure Check from the Disclosure and Barring Service and an online check by the Trust.

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