

'Trainers still bang the
teaching drum, no matter
how broken they are'



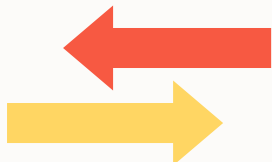
P22

TIME FOR ACTION ON ATTENDANCE, MCKINNELL TELLS LEADERS



Page 7

TRUST WALKS AWAY FROM STRUGGLING CHAIN MERGER



Page 9

WHY 'FRUSTRATED' LOCAL AUTHORITIES WELCOME THE SCHOOLS BILL



Page 26

RACISM IS CENTRAL TO OUR WORKFORCE CRISIS



Page 28

INVESTIGATION:

HOW EHCPS FAIL OUR MOST VULNERABLE KIDS

EH

CP



EXCLUSIVE | Pages 11-14

HEADS OPEN UP OVER PARENT ABUSE

- Leaders 'spat at' and 'offered out' for fights
- Cameras placed outside homes of worried staff
- Head 'too scared to leave work alone at night'

JACK DYSON | @JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE | Page 4

SCHOOLS
WEEK

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Our system has done a good job at chronicling the many issues surrounding education, health and care plans.

Be it the travesty of parents having to fight in court just to obtain one. Or the growing costs of providing them pretty much bankrupting councils.

But what we haven't done so well is investigate what these plans – which are supposed to make a difference for our most vulnerable children – actually contain: what's in them?

Do they include interventions that evidence suggests work? Do they provide specific and quantifiable support, as laws state? Are they personalised? Are schools being given the required funding to deliver them?

Our investigation this week (pages 10 to 14) suggests, in many cases, this isn't the case.

The findings should be a key consideration for policymakers working on reforms to the special needs system.

At the very least, the quality of plans needs improving. One step could be some form of national standards and quality assurance.

But this strikes at another issue: where is the evidence on SEND?

The high needs budget for next year will be nearly £12 billion. Why don't we have a strong understanding of the most effective ways to spend this money?

Trying to work out whether many of the interventions listed in plans were backed by evidence, at least for this journalist, proved near impossible.

After consulting sector leaders on the difficulties, one said 'can you imagine this in health? A journo and the CEO of an NHS trust having a chat about whether there was any evidence hip replacements worked?'

Some think introducing a SEND-equivalent of the health sector's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence may provide a solution.

As others have said, an independent evidence-based arbiter of what support children receive should boost quality and the experience of parents, schools and councils.

It could also help make difficult decisions based on what is the best value for money.

But either way, things need to change.

As Ben Newmark says this week: We wouldn't accept such failures for our most able children, so why are we accepting it for our most vulnerable?

Most read online this week:

- 1 **Academy broke rules over head's Botox and aromatherapy courses**
- 2 **Trust's 'FOMO Fridays' help boost end-of-week attendance**
- 3 **Teachers strike over schools' plans for classes of 30**
- 4 **Special school leaders fear QTS plan could worsen recruitment crisis**
- 5 **Investigation: How councils routinely breach exclusion duty**

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See story, page xx

INVESTIGATION: PARENT ABUSE

Heads face tide of parental abuse

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

School leaders have been confronted outside their homes, spat at and “offered out” for fights as abuse from parents surges, a *Schools Week* investigation can reveal.

One school has even installed cameras outside the homes of worried staff, while a traumatised primary head admits they are too scared to leave work alone late at night.

The head of another – who has been the focus of toxic social media campaigns – thinks online abuse led to one pupil wrongly branding him a paedophile.

Abuse cases ‘almost beyond belief’

Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT), says some of the cases are “almost beyond belief”.

A poll this week found 82 per cent of 1,600 NAHT leaders surveyed said they had been abused by parents in the past 12 months.

Verbal attacks were the most common, followed by posts online. Two-thirds of heads said they had experienced threatening behaviour and nearly a quarter were subject to discriminatory language, including racist, sexist or homophobic terms.

Schools Week has spoken to leaders across the country to chronicle the severity of the abuse. Many want to remain anonymous.

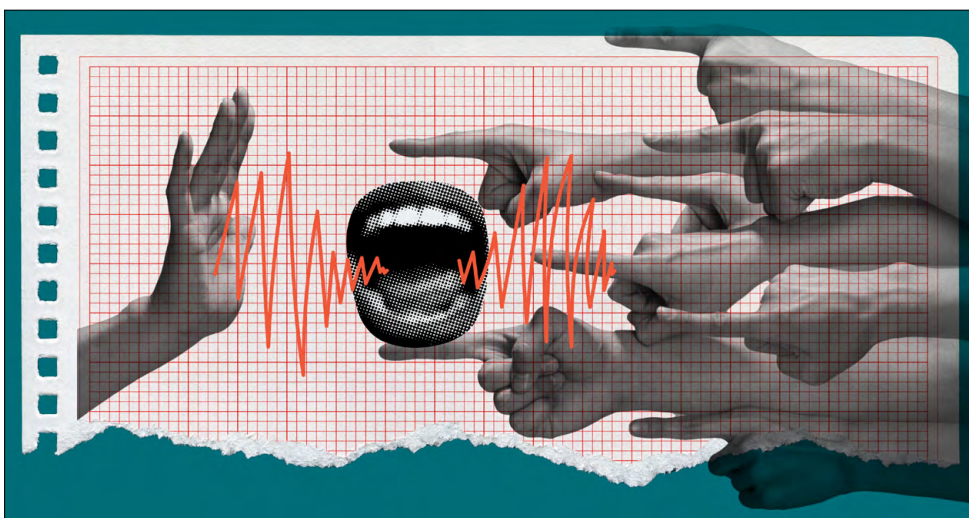
The new head of a Yorkshire secondary says he has “people come in and offer me out on a weekly basis” Another parent called him a “smug c***”.

A West Yorkshire primary school leader thinks expectations have grown “massively”, with parents believing staff “should be on call 24/7”.

On one occasion a parent emailed the school office at 8pm and marched in first thing the next morning “wanting to know what we were going to do with their concern”.

“I’ve had parents saying they will get me sacked, I can’t do my job, I’m not fit to run a school and they might report me to social services about my own children.

“If I’m working on my own late at night trying to catch up with everything, I’m conscious about getting into my car if certain parents are there to verbally or physically abuse me.”



Head ‘could not cope’

Kevin Flanagan, the head of Pensby High School in Wirral, won £10,000 in damages after he took legal action against two parents.

Court documents state that during a meeting in March 2022, one of the parents, Keith Critchley, “became angry, aggressive and highly abusive towards” Flanagan and an assistant head. At one point, Critchley appeared “to be on the brink of physically attacking” Flanagan. Critchley denies this.

Papers also note that Stephanie Critchley “set up a Facebook group entitled ‘FamiliesFightFlanagan’, which she used to encourage others to “complain to Ofsted about Pensby High”.

The Critchleys claimed they were “exercising their Article 10 ECHR right to communicate with others... and to publicly campaign on an issue which the defendants felt strongly about”.

But Flanagan says: “Undoubtedly, if you look back to the beginning [of my teaching career in 1996] to now, you couldn’t measure the increase [in abuse] – it’s so huge.

“One headteacher I know really well, he just could not cope anymore with being told he was shit.”

Debra Walker, the NAHT’s northeast branch secretary, says leaders tell her they have been “spat at”, accused of “lying” and told they’re “not fit to do the job”.

The leader of a coastal secondary has had parents “threaten to come into school and issue violence”.

He believes a social media campaign also

filtered through to pupils, with one recently telling him: “You’re a fat paedophile and you’re getting sacked.”

Headteacher support service Headrest’s latest wellbeing report showed an “increasing number” of reports from leaders about “unreasonable parental behaviours”.

“In some, but not all, instances this has involved either the misuse of social media and/or the use of vexatious complaints – often aligned with a threat to notify Ofsted.”

Fifty-six per cent of leaders and 40 per cent of teachers responding to the charity’s annual survey noted an increase in vexatious complaints from parents and guardians.

Thirty-three per cent reported that parents were more verbally abusive, while 6 per cent said they had become more physically abusive.

Patrick Ottley-O’Connor, a former head who now leads National Professional Qualification for Headship sessions, says aspiring leaders are now “worrying” about having to deal with such abuse.

Fight threats ‘every week’

Most shockingly, the NAHT survey found one in 10 leaders had been the victim of an assault.

The Flanagan court papers claim the Critchleys even “presented themselves without prior invitation or arrangement” outside the home of one of the school’s co-chairs of governors.

The parents insisted they “went to deliver a letter” and “did not harangue him”. Flanagan also spotted Keith Critchley “parked on the street outside his home” one evening in June 2023.

The Critchleys said the defendant “genuinely wanted to speak to the claimant”. He “did not

Continued on next page

INVESTIGATION: PARENT ABUSE

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get out of his car or behave in a threatening or abusive manner”.

But Flanagan told Schools Week that Pensby “put cameras on staff houses because people felt threatened with the nature of the communications” during the dispute.

The anonymous Yorkshire secondary leader said he had received fewer fight threats since the school started to improve. But he warned those “in the turnaround phase” or that don’t secure community buy-in “get a lot more abuse”.

“The reality of teaching in challenging areas is abuse. It’s par for the course.”

Vexatious complaints

The NAHT is urging ministers to review “complaints procedures to deter vexatious use of the existing system by parents” – which can involve referrals to the misconduct agency and Ofsted before school processes have been followed.

The West Yorkshire primary leader says she “nearly walked out of school” last week, after receiving a call from the local authority saying two complaints had been sent to Ofsted.

Flanagan estimates that he receives correspondence from people “telling you they’re going to refer you to the Teaching Regulation Agency” (TRA) about once a month.

The number of TRA misconduct referrals leapt by more than 60 per cent to almost 1,700 in 2023-24. This was “largely driven” by an increase in the number coming from members of the public, the agency said.

Figures obtained through Freedom of Information show they accounted for 54 per cent (1,775) of the 3,300 misconduct reports lodged in the last two years.

Stress and unhappiness

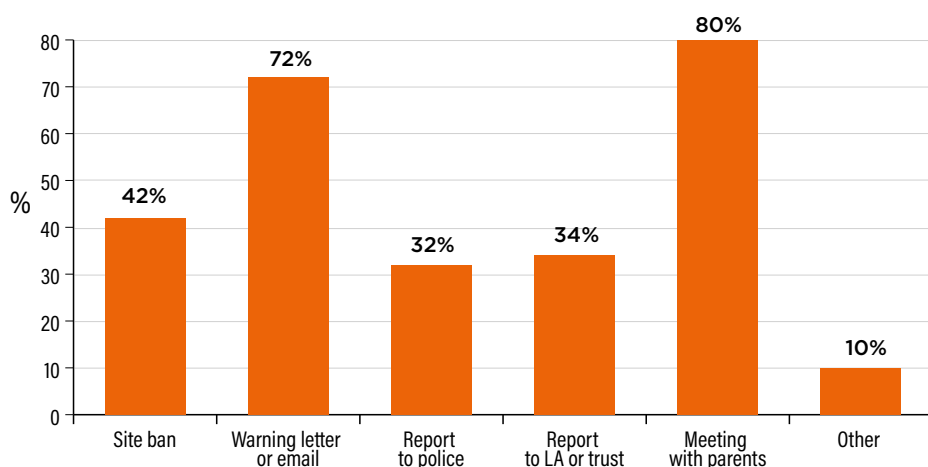
Mark Tilling, the head of High Tunstall College of Science in Hartlepool, says the “velocity of arguments and complaints from parents... are getting bigger and bigger”.

He brings in local authority officers and a mediator – one of his school’s counsellors who is trained in this area – in the more extreme cases.

Meanwhile, the boss of a west London school flagged “the volume of subject access requests and the flooding of paperwork” over the past 12 months, demanding “every email [or] every time my daughter’s name been mentioned”.

He receives two of these a week – which can take more than 50 hours to resolve and

Action taken by leaders after abuse from parents



Source: NAHT

SCHOOLS WEEK



Mark Tilling

“drowning” staff with additional tasks.

Figures also suggest that leaders are finding the job harder.

The latest wave of the DfE’s working lives of teachers and leaders survey revealed 46 per cent of heads reported high levels of anxiety in 2023. This compares with 40 per cent in 2022.

A Teacher Tapp survey of more than 600 heads in October last year showed 27 per cent were either “moderately dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with work. The figure stood at 21 per cent in 2021.

When asked their biggest source of “work-related stress or unhappiness”, 16 per cent pointed to relations with parents.

Ottley-O’Connor believes heads “have very few powers around the online abuse campaigns that in some cases can result in a public ‘pile-on’ of abuse”.

Pensby school used rental income, which has raised more than £800,000 over the past five years, to pay for the legal action



Kevin Flanagan

But Ottley-O’Connor warns that those without access to that kind of cash and governing bodies with the same capacity either have to “live with the abuse or leave”.

‘Time to address this’

Education Mutual, an organisation that provides insurance cover for thousands of schools, from April will cover legal costs for staff who want to sue social media trolls. This includes a template cease-and-desist letter.

Nick Hurn, a trust chief executive who runs Education Mutual, expects this to “nip 90 per cent of these kinds of activities in the bud, making them realise there are consequences for what they say”.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson said last month she was “keen” to learn from the sector how the government should “respond” and “change” to help tackle abusive parents.

The DfE has been contacted for comment.

NEWS

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DfE won't fully fund unexpected post-16 pupils

JACK DYSON

@JACKDYDS

Squeezed school budgets are set to take another hit after the government revealed it won't fully cover growth funding for the "unprecedented" rise in the number of pupils over 16.

Instead, the Department for Education will only cover two-thirds of what schools and sixth-form colleges expected as student increases have leapt above the levels ministers had budgeted for.

Sector leaders are urging the government to correct "years of underinvestment in post-16 education" to ensure schools cope with the continued growth in numbers.

"In-year growth funding" plugs gaps between expected pupil numbers in post-16 settings – used to calculate initial allocations – and the number actually in class as of November.

It is meant to help with cashflow for schools and colleges that end up taking on more students than they were expecting.

But in an update published this week, the DfE noted that while the "very large" increase in 16 to 19-year-olds in education this year was "positive", it was "significantly above the budget for in-year payments".

"The current growth is significantly above the budget available for in-year payments, and so we cannot fully fund this growth.

"We've always stated that our method depends on affordability, but we understand that lower payments will be unexpected."

Anne Murdoch, of the ASCL leaders' union, said: "In some cases extra groups will have been created and additional teachers hired to manage the increase in the number of students, and schools and colleges may have been relying on this funding to cover the additional expense.

"They will have to cover part of this from existing budgets which are already stretched



exceptionally thin."

For this year, a new step, called "the affordability factor", has been added to the way schools calculate how much in-year growth they can claim.

This means only two thirds of the funding difference between expected and actual student numbers can be claimed.

Luke Sibietta, of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, said the effect of the change was likely to be "relatively small in practice".

But it was "certainly noteworthy" if "lots of colleges and sixth forms are seeing high levels of exceptional in-year growth in student number".

"If sustained, it implies higher funding needs in future years, just as the trade-offs in the upcoming spending review look even more challenging."

The department did, though, confirm a 3.78 per cent post-16 funding rate rise, worth about £250 million.

Bill Watkin, the chief executive of the Sixth Form Colleges Association, said all

16 to 19 institutions would have "a welcome increase" in the funding rate next year.

"We live in financially difficult times, with many calls on public money and considerable pressure to make cuts. In that context, today's central announcement of a 3.78 per cent increase is a very welcome development."

Schools will be informed of their growth payments by the end of this month, before receiving the cash in May. Leaders have been told not to assume these rules will apply next year, as no decisions have been made yet.

Murdoch added: "While the overall funding rate rise is welcome, it follows years of underinvestment in post-16 education and must not be offset by cuts elsewhere.

"The number of students in post-16 settings is expected to continue growing over the next few years and the government needs to ensure that sixth forms and colleges have the resources they need to support them."

Meanwhile, this year's 10 per cent T-level funding uplift has not been applied for 2025-26. The DfE said it would "confirm the position" on the uplift "in due course".



Anne Murdoch



Bill Watkin

NEWS

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Term-time holidays 'small part' of attendance woes

RHI STORER

@RHISTORERWRITES

Children taking term-time holidays represent "a very small percentage of the attendance problem", with the government focused on those missing "significant amounts of school on a very regular basis", the schools minister has said.

At a Department for Education attendance conference near Newcastle this week, Catherine McKinnell MP, the Minister of State for School Standards, praised school leaders for "your leadership, your perseverance, your determination and your commitment, in the face of what is a big challenge".

The north east has higher absence rates than any other English region.

During breakout sessions, leaders revealed their efforts to bring absences down, including one approach that involved attendance officers starting at 7.30am to listen through voicemails of parents excusing their child, collating data into postcodes and heading out at 8am to visit homes.

Other ideas included asking children to bring in work they were "proud of" on Fridays and running



a "wheel of fortune" competition with prizes that included a voucher for a bakery chain.

Much of the national debate about tackling absence has focused on unauthorised term-time holidays.

McKinnell told Schools Week that although it was a "significant issue ... it's a very small percentage of the attendance problem".

In the year to date, unauthorised holidays make up 0.4 percentage points of an overall absence rate nationally of 6.7 per cent.

The minister said the "big focus" is on children who regularly miss significant amounts of school.

She pointed to the 1.6 million "persistently"

absent pupils who missed at least a day a fortnight, and the 150,000 "severely" absent – those who missed more school than they attended.

She said there was no doubt absence was the "education challenge of our generation".

She urged leaders "to take away what you've heard today from the speakers, insights, from the conversations, from the anecdotes over coffee, from the support network that you've built amongst yourselves, to turn that into tangible, transformative action.

"To build that inclusion, to re-engage with your communities and restore attendance, not just so that we meet targets, but to unlock every child's opportunity to succeed."

DfE officials were asked whether its network of attendance hubs would be extended, and how it would integrate with new regional improvement teams.

Simon Blake, the DfE's regional director for attendance, said: "We love the hub model.

"We see a load of value in investing further in the networks that we've got. Watch this space, though. There's no announcement yet, but we're certainly thinking."



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Ofsted claims to boost curriculum - based on just 20 visits

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

Ofsted has claimed its current inspection framework led to curriculum improvements, but is facing criticism for basing the finding on just 20 school visits.

The watchdog committed to evaluating its education inspection framework (EIF) after the death of headteacher Ruth Perry.

The evaluation, published on Thursday, claimed "overall, curriculum quality had improved. The schools in our study were more focused on curriculum quality."

But the report was based on visits seven HMIs made to 20 schools last year. The schools were among 64 visited in 2018 as part of curriculum research before the EIF was introduced.

Sample size 'shocking'

Frank Norris, a former senior HMI, described the size and nature of the study's cohort as "quite shocking" and "deeply worrying".

"No empirical study worth its salt would try to draw conclusions from such a small number of schools," he said.

There are more than 24,000 state-funded schools and nurseries across England. Last year, Ofsted inspected 6,930 state-funded schools.

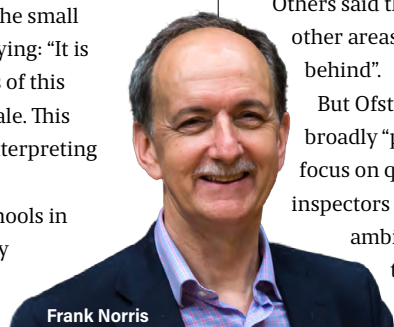
Norris also said the evaluation should have focused on more than just the curriculum and quality of education.

"We know how the various aspects of a framework impact on others so why hasn't there been a focus on leadership or safeguarding? Is this an attempt to try and identify some good news at a time when there is little good Ofsted news?"

Adrian Gray, another former senior HMI, described Ofsted's much-awaited evaluation as "entirely inadequate. A major problem to me is that there is no genuine survey data involved."

The report acknowledges the small sample size in a footnote, saying: "It is worth noting the limitations of this study, especially its small scale. This must be considered when interpreting our findings."

"The experiences of the schools in this study are not necessarily



Frank Norris

**'Is this an attempt to try and identify some good news?'**

representative of schools more broadly."

But Ofsted said "in-depth" interviews were carried out with the 20 school leaders who took part in the research visits. These, combined with the inspectors' measures of education quality, provided "compelling" evidence about the EIF's impact.

The inspectorate said it chose to focus on curriculum and quality of education because the biggest changes of the new EIF put the curriculum at the heart of inspections, and the creation of a new "quality of education" judgment.

Focus on reading leaves maths 'behind'

But some leaders said the focus on curriculum quality across all subjects "put pressure on staff" who taught multiple subjects or were not subject specialists.

Others said the focus on reading meant other areas, such as maths, were "left behind".

But Ofsted said school leaders were broadly "positive" about the EIF's greater focus on quality of curriculum, and said inspectors saw "broader, more in-depth, ambitious curriculums in most of the [20] schools we visited".

About one third of the 20 schools had made "major changes" as a "direct result" of the EIF's new focus on curriculum, it said.

Many were already developing their curricula when the EIF was introduced, but said the new framework had helped them "speed up the changes".

Ofsted said the EIF "played a part" in the improvement to curriculum quality.

But it added: "What is included in our inspection frameworks, and what we inspect, have obvious consequences for practice in the sector. Yet we are only one part of the education system."

It acknowledged myriad reasons for curriculum changes in the six years between the 2018 study and last year's revisits. These included DfE-led changes, new school leaders, schools joining MATs, and academic-led developments.

"Fundamentally, improvements were driven by school leaders and staff who aimed to give children a high-quality education," the report added.

Ofsted is currently consulting on proposals for a new inspection framework, which it hopes to launch in autumn 2025.

Visit the consultation website [here](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/consultations).

NEWS: ACADEMIES

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Trust walks away from merger with struggling chain

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

One of England's biggest academy trusts has walked away from a long-planned merger with a struggling chain, sparking concerns that the worsening funding landscape is going to scupper more schools getting support.

Bath and Wells Diocesan Multi Academy Trust bosses revealed this week it does not have enough funding to absorb Beacon Education's six schools without impacting its current primaries.

It comes after Beacon was handed almost £500,000 to prop it up and surveys uncovered "capital needs" across the chain.

Lucia Glynn, an academy consultant, said the case highlighted how funding pressures deterred some trusts from stepping in to improve underperforming schools.

Trusts 'tightening the belt'

"Trusts are having to tighten the belt more and more and can't take risks any more, they can't even say 'for a couple of years, we will subsidise this trust'. They don't have the flexibility within their budgets."

The Department for Education approved the proposed merger following an advisory board meeting last January. Minutes show Bath and Wells's due diligence "identified capital needs at Beacon schools".

To "support these needs an application will be made to the strategic school improvement capital budget".

The fund is used to secure sponsors for underperforming schools in cases where the condition or suitability of premises are a "significant barrier" to agreement.

At the time, Beacon's Ofsted outcomes were 'poor', according to the minutes, with one academy in special measures and two deemed to be 'coasting'. One of the 'coasting' schools has since been rated 'good'.

Beacon's latest accounts state "it is reliant on additional ESFA funding to be able to continue to operate". So far, it has been given £495,000 "to support short-term cashflow requirements".

The trust has also introduced strategies – such as staff redeployments and mixed-year classes – to "reduce in-year deficits".

Pamela Cosh, Bath and Wells's chair, said it had



become clear that the "level of funding for us to achieve this [the merger] was not available", with it "mindful" of its "responsibility to our existing schools".

More merger caution?

"While we appreciate the steps the DfE has taken to try to address this shortfall, unfortunately the trustees have had to make the very difficult decision to step away from continuing to work with Beacon."

Bath and Wells runs 45 schools. A primary-only MAT, it had just under 9,000 pupils on roll as of last August.

Stephen Morales, the chief executive of the Institute of School Business Leadership, believes the trust merger landscape is complicated by the funding available.

This could lead to MATs "becoming more risk averse... especially where that merger involves larger-scale deficit recovery or capital and condition issues".

This could be "compounded" by the government scrapping trust capacity funding (TCaF) last year. It is understood, however, that Bath and Wells's decision was not affected by the removal of TCaF.

Beacon is not large enough to qualify for annual allocations of capital funding. Instead it applies for building cash through the condition improvement fund (CIF).

Of the 4,363 schools eligible for CIF, just under half applied for cash last year. Only 866 projects were approved, with £450 million awarded.

This is a near 60 per cent fall since 2020-21 when ministers gave 2,104 schemes more than £563 million.

£14bn maintenance backlog

Dr Jonathan Dewsbury, the Department for Education's director of education estates, revealed in October that Labour had ordered a review of the system for issuing capital funding.

He noted that for "those small trusts that access CIF, it's perhaps too complicated and not in some places as accessible as it needs to be".

A National Audit Office report last year revealed a £13.8 billion backlog in maintenance.

It cited several reasons, including historic under-investment, cost increases and inflation. Many buildings have also reached the end of their operational life.

A Beacon spokesperson noted that while the pulling of the merger "represents a shift in our immediate plans, it is important to highlight the significant progress made across our schools".

A recent monitoring visit to Danesfield, a Beacon school in Somerset rated 'requires improvement' three times in a row, praised "strengthened leadership, curriculum enrichment, and the level of support from the trust".

It was "working constructively with colleagues from the Diocese of Bath and Wells and DfE to consider options for long-term and sustainable future partnerships".



INSPIRING LEADERSHIP

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INVESTIGATION:

HOW EHCPs FAIL
OUR MOST
VULNERABLE
KIDS

EH

CP



England now spends nearly £11 billion providing education for children with additional needs. But the outcomes for these children are not improving. Parents are forced to fight in court for support, and it's bankrupting councils.

What is this money being spent on? Schools Week investigates ...

JOHN DICKENS

@JOHNDICKENSSW

EXCLUSIVE

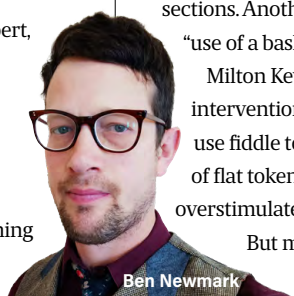
A special Schools Week investigation today exposes how education, health and care plans (EHCPs) fail the most vulnerable children.

We found:

- Schools are legally bound to deliver interventions that evidence shows are ineffective, such as fidget toys and learning styles
- The quality of education, health and care plans is consistently slammed by Ofsted. One trust said they had EHCPs “copied and pasted over from other children”, and some even “had the wrong name” on them.
- Analysis by experts suggests most plans break the law over providing specific and quantifiable support – helping councils shirk their legal duty to fully fund provision.* Absent health and social care providers are pushing more responsibilities on to schools. One trust has warned an NHS board of a ‘significant risk to the health and life’ of vulnerable children over cuts

Ben Newmark, a teacher and SEND expert, said: “We would not accept any of this for the most able pupils.

“If we were exposing them to this level of inconsistency and unevidenced practice, we just wouldn’t accept it. So why are we allowing it for the children who find learning the hardest and the most vulnerable?”



Ben Newmark

FIDGET SPINNERS AND LEARNING
STYLES: EHCPs’ QUESTIONABLE
INTERVENTIONS

Schools Week asked 25 councils for a copy of section F of their 10 most recent EHCPs. This sets out the education provision that must be delivered. While this duty sits with the council, it falls to schools to carry out the provision.

Most councils refused to release plans, citing privacy concerns (Schools Week asked for personal details to be redacted).

Of the four councils that provided plans, many include interventions that studies suggest have no evidence to back their impact – or could do more harm than good.

Fidget toys, or a variation of this such as “fiddle”, were mandated as interventions in 10 plans across all four areas.

Sunderland had four EHCPs containing the intervention. For one, “sensory breaks and sensory tools or fidget toys” was included in four separate sections. Another plan said the child needed “use of a basket of fidget toys”.

Milton Keynes had three EHCPs with the intervention. One plan stated: “Allow him to use fiddle toys (such as Blu Tack or a bowl of flat tokens) if he is feeling anxious, or overstimulated, or needs help to concentrate.”

But many studies say they are

ineffective. A 2022 US paper even suggested “the negative effects of fidget toys on attention and learning outweigh [any] potential sensory benefits”.

Applying interventions that are not validated “sometimes can do more harm than good”, it added.

Sunderland council refused to comment.

Debunked ‘learning styles’ feature in EHCPs

The long-debunked “learning styles” intervention appeared in three EHCPs.

One Sunderland plan said that “teaching style and tasks should be adapted to suit [redacted’s] developmental level and learning style”.

Another mandated a “broad and balanced differentiated curriculum which is underpinned with specific strategies, including consideration of her preferred learning style”.

But there is “very limited” evidence of “any consistent set of learning ‘styles’ that can be used reliably to identify genuine differences in the learning needs of young people”, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) states.

Any “impacts recorded [in studies] are generally low or negative”.

David Thomas, a former Department of Education adviser, said parents often “fight, fight, fight for this thing that should make a difference”.

“But if what they get at the end is a plan that doesn’t make things better – then what is the system delivering?

“We talk a lot about the challenges of getting an EHCP ... we don’t talk enough about whether the plans are any good and whether the interventions they mandate work.”

Continued on next page

INVESTIGATION

HOW EHCPS FAIL OUR MOST VULNERABLE KIDS

Ben Newmark added such examples also showed the “leap between identifying a child as having a SEND need, and helping them, could often be a yawning chasm”.

“We cannot assume identification does any good, and must be open to the plausibility it might do harm.”

Where is the evidence?

The findings point to a wider issue – the lack of robust evidence for what interventions work in SEND.

Children taking physically active breaks, or “brain” or “movement breaks”, featured in plans across all four areas.

One Milton Keynes plan stated: “Movement breaks and sensory aids should be explained to in simple terms, ie, that these can help him to stay focused and be a better learner.”

A plan issued in Manchester mandated “short brain breaks of up to five minutes throughout his lessons to prevent cognitive overload”.

Few were recommended in the “physical/sensory” part of EHCPs. Most were in the “cognition and learning” section.

But studies show mixed results in relation to the latter.

A University of Edinburgh paper last year found “existing research evidence is inconsistent in finding support” for claims the intervention improves academic achievement and cognitive function.

The plans featured other schemes that leave SEND experts sceptical, including Lego therapy, wobble cushions,

chew buddies, zones of regulation, dough disco and squiggle while you wiggle.

Cassie Young, an inclusion executive officer for a Kent academy trust, said the “limited” research into specific SEND interventions left schools “relying on anecdotal evidence or practice-based wisdom rather than robust, large-scale studies”.

“It does seem surprising given the number of interventions in circulation, but this is largely because SEND is not a homogeneous group, making it difficult to conduct universal, conclusive research that applies to all children with additional needs.”

‘We don’t talk enough about whether the plans are any good’

Newmark added it was difficult to learn from best practice “because we don’t have a shared understanding” of “what SEND means”.

“We can’t study something if no one can agree what that thing is...we’re all just talking past each other.”

‘We should be using reasonable adjustments’

A solution is needed, quickly. The high-needs budget now sits at £11 billion – a 60 per cent rise in real-

terms since 2015.

But despite spiralling funding, outcomes have not improved.

“If identifications and associated interventions aren’t useful, then spending more on them will just waste money,” Newmark said.

“Without reform in the way it is spent, more funding will not have a proportionate impact.”

Some are now calling for SEND to have a National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), which evaluates health interventions (see box out).

Thomas said that while it was legitimate for schools to try different things – especially when things were not working for a pupil – “we should not be creating legal requirements to do a particular intervention unless we are certain it works.”

Experts were also surprised some EHCPs included interventions such as ear defenders, a “structured learning environment” or “additional time to complete activities”.

One trust said it had an EHCP that mandated a “structured programme” to “help develop [a child’s] ability to be toileting independently” by the end of key stage 3.

But the plan added provision needed to include him “really enjoying using his personalised handwash that is available in the classroom” – legally binding the school to provide this.

Anne Heavey, who sits on the government’s school inclusion reforms panel, said to achieve ministers’ aim of more inclusive mainstream schools, “we need to support more to make reasonable adjustments as part of their everyday universal offer.

“Some of the content in these

Cassie Young

Anne Heavey

Calls grow for send evidence ‘custodian’

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has a pivotal role in ensuring new treatments and medicines used in the NHS are effective, but also value for money.

Given the spiralling cost but stagnant outcomes for pupils with additional needs, calls are now growing for an equivalent body for SEND.

Iain Mansfield, a former DfE special adviser, said there had been “minimal efforts to match costs to efficacy – or even to measure efficacy at all” in high-needs spending.

“A NICE for education would allow hard, but necessary, decisions to be made fairly – and for the money we are spending to be used in the way that benefits all children the most.

“Given the scale of the cost, and the impact

on the system as a whole, it is not just necessary, but long overdue.”

How would it work?

NICE sets out what good healthcare looks like. This includes quality standards, guidance for frontline health staff and how to assess and treat common conditions.

Mansfield said evaluation of SEND interventions could look at basic academic metrics, alongside wider life outcomes such as employability or enabling independent learning.

The Local Government Association said in a report last year a NICE-type body should produce “standards for mainstream inclusion” and act as a “custodian” for best practice.

David Thomas said an “independent evidence-based arbiter of what support a child should be getting would both raise quality and improve experience.

“Rather than determining support by pitching parents and local authorities against each other, the appropriate support would already be set out,” he said. “NICE creates an external reference point for what good care should look like.”

Guidance could be separated into two tiers: common issues such as struggling to read, and advice for more specific conditions.

For the first tier, guidance could set out “best bets”, and suggest an order to try different treatments.

Mansfield added such as body

Iain Mansfield

Continued on next page

INVESTIGATION

HOW EHCPs FAIL OUR MOST VULNERABLE KIDS

EHCPs should just be in place for pupils without jumping through the hurdles of a statutory assessment.”

A spokesperson for Milton Keynes council said its plans were “structured in a uniform way to ensure consistent support”. Specifics of plans were “co-produced between parents, schools, youngsters and local partnership professionals”.

However, it faced increased demand for EHCPs and a shortage of professionals in critical areas.

David Collingwood, president of the Association of Educational Psychologists, added that “evidence-based interventions don’t work for everyone” and “some of the evidence can be around what works for that particular child”.

“For me, fidget spinners would be OK if there’s evidence on the ground that actually it does help this particular child – the child is reporting that, and the classroom teachers are reporting that.”

POOR QUALITY EHCPs LEAVE SCHOOLS SHORTCHANGED

The SEND code of practice states provision “must be detailed and specific and should normally be quantified, for example, in terms of the type, hours and frequency of support and level of expertise”.

But analysis by Schools Week of SEND area inspection reports show Ofsted repeatedly flags poor quality of plans, even in the few areas judged to be “positive”.

A December inspection in Lancashire found plans were “often of a poor quality”.

A July inspection in Hertfordshire added plans lacked “precision and clarity”. Errors pointed out by

parents during drafts also made it into final plans.

Across the 10 EHCPs obtained from Milton Keynes, the same phrase asking SENCos to “cascade the identified strategies and provision to all class teachers and support staff at the start of each half term” appeared 40 times.

In one EHCP from Sunderland, the same paragraphs were listed in the “provision required” section of the report for all four “desired outcomes”.

“Examples like this suggest there isn’t always thought about how provision will be enacted in reality by school staff or if it will have a meaningful impact for the pupil,” Anne Heavey said.

EHCPs are written by councils, but based on advice from professionals involved with the child, including educational psychologists who must assess pupils.

Phil Humphreys, director of education at Lift Schools, said their own analysis shows “in the most extreme cases, plans are just copied and pasted from other children, and even have name of the child wrong as a result”.

Collingwood added lack of EPs and backlogs are a “massive problem”, adding “time means” mean there is “always pressure to write advice quicker”.

But Humphreys added: “All of this amounts to a picture of a system that is badly broken and which all too frequently fails to deliver what it is intended to do.

“The whole system is crying out for a review and fresh start.”

Vagueness lets councils evade financial accountability

Consultants from Premier Advisory Group (PAG) have reviewed nearly 400 EHCPs across 20 schools and trusts.

They found more than 90 per cent did not comply with the SEND code of practice, with many being too vague.

A PAG report for one trust, which looked at about 140 EHCPs, found just five where more than half of the support listed was “quantifiable”. Thirteen (9 per cent) had no quantifiable support listed at all.

For instance, one report said: “She will require 1:1 or small group support to enable her to access and complete learning activities.”

Matt Keer, a SEND expert who writes for specialist website Special Needs Jungle, said: “We give parents a list of weasel words and phrases to look out for (“access to”, “opportunities for”, “as required”).

“While vapid EHCP content suits the local authority, it often sets families up for conflict with schools.”

Gary Aubin, a SEND expert, said plans needed an “element of schools being able to make it work in their context”.

“But where trust has eroded within our SEND system, stakeholders start believing – sometimes correctly – that ‘if it isn’t written down in detail, it either won’t happen or won’t be funded’.”

The PAG report concluded the lack of detail in the 140 EHCPs it analysed meant it was not possible to “fully understand the cost of support needed”. Forty per cent of plans also had no funding stated.

Tom Legge, PAG’s managing director, said the poor quality of EHCPs “begs the question as to whether this is cock-up or conspiracy”, given they were “more often than not accompanied by funding that, even on the most cursory analysis, is insufficient to meet need”.



Matt Keer



Tom Legge

Continued...

should also “compare the improvement in outcomes to the cost” – with a value-for-money threshold set. Those falling short should “not be funded”.

While this would be “complex”, it was “no more difficult, and no more sensitive, than the work that NICE does in assessing how conditions such as pain, mobility, use of bodily functions and so on combine to constitute a ‘Quality Adjusted Life Year’.”

Gary Aubin said the EEF already had the expertise to take on such a role.

What happens in the meantime?

While acknowledging “massive gaps” in provision around SEND interventions and

approaches, Aubin said it was “not true” that pupils with SEND always needed entirely different things to other pupils.

More work also needed to be done on “how we adapt approaches we know work for all pupils”.

Cassie Young, an inclusion executive officer for a Kent academy trust, agreed it made more sense to focus on adapting mainstream approaches with a strong research base, rather than investing heavily in interventions that lacked evidence.

“While SEND-specific research is lacking, that shouldn’t mean we abandon evidence-based decision-making. We need to be critical about what we adopt, ensuring that

whatever we do has a clear purpose and is evaluated for impact, rather than relying on interventions simply because they are popular or feel like ‘the done thing’.”

Chris Paterson, co-CEO of the EEF, said it is “crucial to support schools – and the wider sector – to reject approaches and interventions that have a weak evidence base”.

Evidence suggested support for pupils with special needs in mainstream schools “should start with high quality teaching that is inclusive by design... complemented with more targeted, effective interventions to help overcome the most significant barriers to learning”.

INVESTIGATION

HOW EHCPS FAIL OUR MOST VULNERABLE KIDS

Schools left to pick up funding gaps

When schools were consulted on the actual cost of EHCP provision, PAG found widespread underfunding from councils.

Analysis of one trust's EHCPs found its mainstream schools had a gap in funding of between £10,000 to £30,000 per school.

For the special schools in the trust, the funding gap across fewer than 50 EHCPs amounted to nearly £3 million.

One particular issue, according to the reports, is the quantity of 1:1 support mandated.

PAG analysis of EHCPs across mainstream schools at one trust found while few had quantifiable support, 80 per cent of it was 1:1.

Another of its reports stated a trust, which ran classes of one qualified teacher and two teaching assistants per eight pupils, would need an extra TA per class to provide the level of 1:1 support mandated. This would cost £750,000 extra per year across just two schools.

One trust leader told *Schools Week* it got £19,000 top-up funding for a child with complex needs. However, the child required full-time 1:1 support, which cost £27,000.

This also did not include other mandated interventions, such as at least 40 hours a year of speech therapy.

Jon Coles, CEO of United Learning which has analysed its schools' EHCPs, said: "Sometimes, what is proposed seems designed to insulate a child from access to excellent teaching".

"In some examples, 6 or 7 hours of 1:1 activities are required per week, with no apparent assessment of the costs or benefits of a child being out of class for over a day each week."

"I am seriously concerned that many billions of pounds are being spent on a system which claims to be bespoke to individual children, but in reality is far from that, and is likely to be having limited benefit to a lot of children – and perhaps no or negative impact on considerable numbers."

Director and barrister Dean Hulse, from HY Education solicitors, which has an EHCP benchmarking tool, said the 2014 Children and Families Act created a "hard edged legal duty" for councils to ensure support in section F is provided.

"Yet day in, day out, schools are being asked to deliver this provision without adequate funding."

Keer added, that given a council's legal responsibility, a school or family "should be in a powerful position to rectify things".

Legge said schools' "desperation" at the funding situation was "driving an increased number to litigate against their home councils – often as a last resort to draw attention to their plight".

PICKING UP THE PIECES OF ABSENT HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE PROVIDERS

EHCPs are supposed to be created in collaboration with health and social care professionals. But this is not happening.

A report by the children's commissioner in 2022 analysed about 650 EHCPs from two councils, one in London and the other the Midlands.

None of the EHCPs had a blank section F – which mandates education provision. But data was missing for 61 of the 152 (40 per cent) EHCPs for the "health" and "social care" provision sections.

In one of the councils, the average word count to describe all aspects listed under "general" provision was 150. For health and social care provision, the word counts were 16 and 38 respectively.

'Many children are missing out on the support they deserve'

Meanwhile, an Ofsted area SEND inspection at Derbyshire in September found that some plans were "finalised without contributions from health or social care professional".

In Milton Keynes, an inspection in March last year found "most EHC plans do not contain health and care outcomes, even when children and young people have demonstrable needs.

"This means that schools often lack the expert advice and support required to ensure the full ranges of a child's needs are met."

In Lancashire, contributions from health and social care in plans "can be scant and, in a number, not evident".

"General practitioners (GPs) are not routinely asked to inform the EHC plan process, even as primary

record holders. For some, they are not aware when there is an EHC plan in existence for a child or young person under their care," the report added.

In Hillingdon, west London, a report last year found "too often health and social care professionals were not invited, did not attend, or did not submit updated advice for annual reviews".

"Consequently, the plans focus too heavily on education."

The report concluded that: "Overall, many EHC plans are not useful.

Reforms must look at health contribution

Warren Carratt, the chief executive of the Nexus MAT of mostly special schools, warned of a "myriad" of interventions that were "clearly misplaced" in the education section.

His trust has an EHCP which includes hydrotherapy 'bundled' into section F, for instance. This means "schools have to provide it, and councils have to fund it".

"To compound this issue, universal health services have been reduced over time."

"There then isn't the availability of health professionals for schools to commission, leaving more public money flowing to private providers."

A *Schools Week* investigation in 2019 revealed how complex health needs of special schools pupils are delegated to school staff as the number of school nurses has dropped.

Leaders say the situation has worsened. One trust recently wrote to an NHS board about nursing service cuts at some of its schools, warning it creates "significant risk to the health and life of these children".

Councils have to "abide by changes" directed in SEND tribunals over section F issues. But tribunals can "only recommend changes, they have no power to direct" over health and social care provision, Keer added.

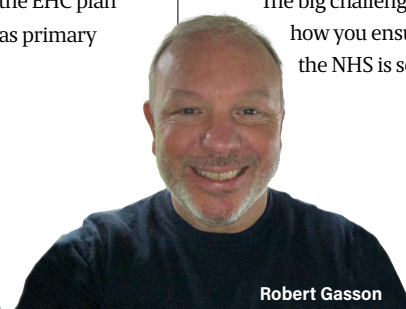
Robert Gasson, the chief executive of the Wave Trust, said: "Health advice is supposed to be a core part of these plans, yet delays, vague recommendations, and poor coordination mean many children miss out on the support they deserve."

Thomas added the often-missing health contribution was the "main catastrophe of EHCPs.

The big challenge for SEND reforms now is how you ensure health provision when the NHS is so stretched."



Warren Carratt



Robert Gasson

OPINION: EHCPs

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
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NEWMARK

Teacher, school leader and parent

SEND provision is the last
bastion of unevidenced practice

We must do better for pupils with SEND whose education is so often made worse by interventions that are meant to be supporting them, explains Ben Newmark

In medicine, diagnosis and treatment are typically useful because those who decide upon them share an understanding of processes and terms. Even if they disagree, two doctors discussing the same patient draw on shared knowledge that makes it more likely they'll find consensus on an intervention plan.

Not so in education, and this is causing chaos in our SEND system.

We can't agree on which children common labels such as 'cognition and learning', 'learning difficulty', 'social, emotional and mental health' and many others apply to. This makes it impossible to know if what happens because of these labels is of any use.

In turn, this means damaging pseudo-medical diagnostic and treatment procedures remain stubbornly resistant to our efforts to make education more evidence-informed.

For example, despite there being no evidence for such conditions, thousands of children continue to be identified with Meares-Irlen syndrome or visual stress and prescribed coloured paper and/or tinted lenses.

Similarly, as this week's Schools Week investigation shows, EHCPs and documents like Pupil Passports often include adaptations and interventions for which there is no evidence of efficacy beyond placebo or Hawthorne effects.

These include fidget toys, wobble cushions, sensory tents and even learning styles, which have been debunked and driven out of education everywhere else.

A particularly worrying concern is that it appears those working in schools can't trust the advice of those who input into EHCPs; many of the dubious suggestions explored in this investigation come from them. In the absence of robust evidence, they appear to often rely on little more than anecdote and personal experience.

The medicalised model on which diagnosis and intervention are based is also sustaining a belief – inside and outside of education – that children learn in different ways, that some just can't make adequate progress unless they have very different provision to others.

In most cases this just isn't true, but the belief is causing much of the ire and antagonism between families and schools and putting great pressure on SEND departments and special schools.

The truth is that all children benefit from predictability, order, calm and carefully sequenced instruction with plenty of checking for understanding



“Going on as we are comes with two huge costs

and adaptive teaching. But a plethora of the interventions children identified with SEND are subject to makes these base conditions harder to create and embed.

This would be less of a problem if the labels and interventions were useful to those they were applied to. And perhaps some are, but lack of clarity around terms and grave weaknesses in review processes (where these exist) mean we have no real way of knowing.

Do movement breaks work? Social stories? Sensory circuits? Zones of regulation? If they do, what are the conditions required to make them successful?

We have absolutely no idea and the wide range of practice that sits beneath these terms means we couldn't construct studies even if we wanted to.

Some will argue this doesn't matter, that if people [ITALS] feel something helps them then that's enough.

This is a weak argument. Experiences and outcomes for children exposed to the SEND system are dire; children, their

families and professionals who work with them are by and large deeply unhappy with the status quo.

And it's no surprise, because going on as we are comes with two huge costs.

The first is opportunity cost. Any child doing anything is not doing something else. If what they are doing is worse than what they could be doing, then we are harming their educational chances. Sadly, it is highly plausible that a SEND identification is doing just that by way of poorly conceived interventions – and this with some of our most vulnerable learners.

The second is financial cost. The entire system is creaking – whole councils facing bankruptcy – under the weight of SEND demand. This can only make things worse for all children, and experience tells us the most vulnerable pay the price first and hardest.

In short, the SEND white paper mooted this week must bring plans to improve EHCPs and bring some quality assurance to bear on the process – even if that's not popular in the short term.



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NEWS

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Cheaper to pay fines than provide SEND support

ROSA FURNEAUX

@ROSAFURNEAUX

EXCLUSIVE

Councils across England are paying families thousands of pounds after failing to provide support set out in education, health and care plans (EHCPs).

But experts say the costs can be less than providing the special educational needs provision children are entitled to – meaning services “rarely improve”.

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) investigates complaints from parents about councils’ administrative actions, and can request that councils pay “financial remedy”.

Schools Week examined complaints made over the past four months, and found 21 cases in which councils paid out at least £2,000.

In one case, Hertfordshire County Council paid the mother of a boy who had been excluded from school £8,500.

The ombudsman found it at fault for not providing an appropriate education or the specialist provision stipulated in his EHCP for more than a year.

Surrey County Council was found to have caused “significant injustice” to a teenager after “repeated failures” left her for two years without any of the educational provision or therapeutic activities detailed in her EHCP.

The council paid her father £14,400 for her loss of education, plus £500 in recognition of the family’s “distress, uncertainty, and time and trouble”.

But payouts are “almost always far less than the cost of delivering provision in the first place,” said Matt Keer of Special Needs Jungle.

As a result, “even though the overwhelming majority of complaints are upheld, local SEND practice rarely improves”.

Ombudsman guidance states councils should pay up to £2,400 per term when their fault has resulted in a loss of education provision. Parents can also get £100 for each month an EHCP is delayed over the statutory 20 weeks.

But provision mandated by an EHCP costs on average £19,100 a year for a mainstream secondary placement and £23,900 in a state special school, according to the National Audit Office. Private places average £61,500.



A spokesperson for Hertfordshire council said it took “all decisions by the LGSCO very seriously”.

The council noted an increase of more than 200 per cent in EHCPs since 2015. More than half of its EHC needs assessments were now completed on time, above the national average.

Surrey said it had invested £15 million into a multi-year plan that included recruiting more staff and building new specialist school places.

It said its EHCP timeline levels were well above the national average and it had caught up on its backlog of EHC needs assessments.

Last March, Schools Week revealed SEND complaints to the ombudsman had nearly tripled since 2019.

Ninety-two per cent of the SEND complaints investigated in 2023-24 were upheld. The ombudsman’s office told Schools Week it expected to uphold a similar proportion this year.

“A situation where we are upholding nearly 100 per cent of complaints cannot be one that is working for children and their families,” it recently told the parliamentary education committee’s ongoing SEND inquiry.

Not a deterrent

Gillian Doherty, also of Special Needs Jungle, said it was difficult to know whether councils’ actions were deliberate.

“They are in a desperate financial situation, so they’re saving money in whatever short-term way they can – regardless of the consequences.”



Margaret Mulholland

She added the level of the penalties were “not of a deterrent nature...That gets completely exploited”.

Brendan Anderson, an independent SEND and EHCP consultant, said parents had told him the £100 “does not really compensate for the missed provision”.

“If it was £1,000 a month, maybe things would change.”

The ombudsman said the payments were “not intended to act as compensation or a fine”.

Instead, payments were “a modest symbolic amount” to recognise “the fault and injustice experienced by the young person and family involved”.

The ombudsman also makes recommendations on how to improve councils’ service.

“The starting point for the remedies we recommend...is to try and put the person back in the position they should have been in if the issues had not occurred.”

“In circumstances where a child or young person has been out of school or without provision for an extended period, that is not generally possible”.

Margaret Mulholland, SEND and inclusion specialist at the ASCL leaders’ union, said that behind each story was a child and their family “wrestling with complex issues and desperately in need of expert help”.

“We urgently need to rescue the special educational needs system to ensure that schools and local authorities have the capacity they need to offer timely support to all children in their care.”

NEWS

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DfE wants to 'improve' pupil premium reporting

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

The government is seeking to "improve" the way schools report on pupil premium spending, as an influential committee demands officials follow up settings that fail to do so.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, the chair of the public accounts committee, warned today that "for too many schools, the government is not sighted on how money that ought to be spent on helping disadvantaged children overcome their circumstances is actually being used".

It comes after a National Audit Office report last year found the Department for Education "cannot demonstrate it is achieving value for money" in the way it uses an annual £9.2 billion to narrow the disadvantage gap.

It warned the DfE had "limited evidence" on how well almost half of its disadvantage funding is spent.

It also found that one in five schools failed to meet its duty in 2023 to report how it spent the pupil premium – which makes up £2.9 billion of disadvantage funding.

The committee has now recommended the DfE introduces "stronger and clearer" mechanisms to understand how schools spend funding, while allowing them to retain the principle of local decision-making.



It said the department should collect data on where schools use disadvantage-focused funding for interventions such as tutoring. It should also stress the need for schools to publish pupil premium spending plans, and follow up any schools that do not.

A DfE survey issued earlier this week suggests the government is keen to better its understanding of how the pupil premium is spent.

On Monday, the department invited schools leaders and parents to take part in research about "school accountability reform and performance".

Part of this will focus on "improvements to how schools report on pupil premium spending", said the DfE.

Details are not known. Those interested must fill out a short form, and will be contacted by researchers if invited to participate.

The PAC's inquiry heard evidence from existing research showing that pupil premium funding increasingly is used for whole-school interventions or to plug budget deficits.

More than 90 per cent of disadvantage funding is not ringfenced, allowing leaders to spend it as they see fit.

But research by The Sutton Trust found 47 per cent of senior school leaders last year used pupil premium to plug budget gaps, more than double the 23 per cent of 2019.

ASCL, the leaders' union, said schools would only use disadvantage funding for budget gaps as "a last resort" and that it was "symptomatic of the inadequacy of school funding overall".

Pupil premium funding is paid to schools for every child who has been eligible for free school meals at any point in the preceding six years, and is often used as a proxy for measuring disadvantage.

But an Education Policy Institute report this week warned government policy decisions and changes in the make-up of those claiming free school meals has made data on such pupils "less useful for research".

Support therefore was targeted "less efficiently", it warned.

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

Toothbrushing to roll out to schools - but where?

The government has said its supervised toothbrushing programme will be rolled out to schools in the "most deprived" areas of England, but has not named the areas that will take part.

£11 million in funding will be available to councils from April, helping "hundreds of thousands of children aged between three and five years old to develop positive brushing habits".

Funding will not be available to cover staffing in schools, with leaders fearing an additional burden. But it will cover training and equipment.

The Department of Health and Social Care stated that councils will "deploy supervised toothbrushing in schools and nurseries that



voluntarily sign up". This would take place in "target areas".

Asked what the "target areas" were,

the DHSC said it would be up to councils to identify volunteer schools, but these would be in the 20 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods.

The government has also announced it has agreed a deal with Colgate to donate more than 23 million toothbrushes and toothpastes to support the programme.

But NAHT general secretary Paul Whiteman said we "cannot keep loading increasing expectations on schools...Nor can we keep looking to schools to fix all of society's ills.

"Most people would see tooth brushing as a basic part of parenting, and we must be careful not to shift what is ultimately a parental responsibility onto the shoulders of schools."

NEWS IN BRIEF

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?

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Union puts Harris strikes on hold

Strikes that would have been the largest ever at an academy trust have been put on hold after the National Education Union (NEU) claimed a "landmark victory".

But the Harris Federation, the trust at the centre of the dispute, has slammed the union for trying to sow "division" and "create conflict" among staff – including by "inappropriately invoking the Windrush scandal".

The NEU had been balloting staff across 18 Harris schools on proposed walkouts over working conditions, after 90 per cent supported taking strike action.

But union members voted to end the 15-month dispute following ACAS talks.

The NEU claims the discussions prompted a "significant change" in the trust's position, but Harris denies this.

Among other things, the union said Harris "finally" agreed "Caribbean and other overseas-trained teachers will have autonomy to decide when they are ready to move forward with the assessment-only route" for qualified status (QTS).

Harris has been criticised for reportedly paying teachers recruited from Jamaica less than their colleagues.

Daniel Kebede, the union's general secretary, said: "This was Harris Federation's Windrush. It is a record they should be



ashamed of."

The union added that "relevant years of teaching experience will now be recognised on appointment", with the trust committing to "top up salaries for new starters to the equivalent salary point on the main scale".

On workload, the NEU said Harris "has increased the minimum amount of protected planning preparation and assessment time for teachers to 12 per cent".

However, a Harris spokesperson said his comment "belittles what happened to the Windrush victims".

Harris confirmed it had changed part of its policy on overseas-trained teachers. Previously, once heads agreed the employee was ready to pass the QTS assessment, the trust paid the £2,800 fees.

Overseas teachers now decide – but if they fail, they will have to fund it themselves when they try again.

[Full story here](#)

Special schools take in fewer ITT graduates



Special schools take in fewer staff directly from teacher training streams and instead "rely" on teachers gaining experience with SEND pupils in mainstream settings, a report has found.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has published the second in a two-part series of reports looking at staffing challenges faced by special schools.

It found just under 20 per cent of teachers joining special schools in 2022-23 came straight from initial teacher training (ITT), compared with an average of about 30 per cent joining primary and secondary schools.

One "relatively radical option" would be for the DfE to set up a specialist ITT route with courses for trainees who wanted to teach in specialist settings, said the NFER.

However, it noted this could risk suggesting "that teaching children with SEND is somehow fundamentally different to educating other children", and making it less easy for teachers to move between special and mainstream settings.

NFER said another option would be emphasising SEND expertise in the early career framework, and encouraging and strengthening trainee placements in special schools.

The study also found teachers leaving special schools are more likely than other teachers to leave the state system entirely.

NFER found special schools had lower teacher turnover rates than other schools, which it called "encouraging". However, it found alternative provision (AP) settings had "much higher" turnover rates.

[Full story here](#)

NASUWT backs former fire union official

EXCLUSIVE



Matt Wrack

Matt Wrack, the veteran former leader of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), has been nominated to take over as general secretary of the NASUWT, *Schools Week* can reveal.

The union's executive has named Wrack, who led the FBU for 20 years until he was

unseated in an election in January, as its preferred candidate for the role that Dr Patrick Roach will leave later this year.

NASUWT branches can now nominate challengers. However, NASUWT has not had a contested election in more than 30 years.

If elected, Wrack would be the first general secretary in NASUWT's history not to come from an education background. He was a firefighter before becoming a trade union official.

He is a close ally of Daniel Kebede, the general secretary of the National Education Union, raising the prospect of much closer working between the two unions if he is elected.

[Full story here](#)

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Karl Edwards****Managing director of ImpactEd Evaluation****Start date:** July**Previous job:** Director of strategy and impact, Teach First**Interesting fact:** Karl is a keen drummer and after a long break is now playing again alongside his seven-year-old son.

Movers & Shakers

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

**Jimmy Joseph****Young mayor of Islington at Islington Council****Start date:** February**Current job:** Student of hospitality and tourism at Capital City College**Interesting fact:** A committed Arsenal fan, Jimmy has "always had a passion for contemporary dance". As a child he found it helped him with his emotions – and to be active.**Trish D'Souza****Legal director, Browne Jacobson****Start date:** November 2024**Previous role:** Legal director – education and public law, Blake Morgan**Interesting fact:** Trish has a twin brother and the year she was born there were 30 pairs of twins living in her small village – with their story making it to the pages of the *Daily Mail*.**Joanna Goddard****Legal director, Browne Jacobson****Start date:** October 2024**Previous role:** Senior associate (regulatory compliance – education), VWV**Interesting fact:** "Sweet Fanny Adams", who was murdered at the age of 8 by a solicitor's clerk in Alton, Hampshire, in 1867 (leading to the expression "Sweet FA"), is an ancestor of Joanna's.**Mark Liddiard****Chief operating officer, BEST Bedfordshire Schools Trust****Start date:** June**Current role:** Senior development manager, The Football Association**Interesting fact:** He is a long-standing governor at local schools, including the current chair at Robert Bloomfield Academy. He is also a Central Bedfordshire councillor.

Ofqual on the lookout for new board members

FEATURED

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson is seeking "at least" three new board members for exams regulator Ofqual.

The Department for Education has told schools that it is seeking applicants for three roles: "generalist", vocational and technical qualifications expert and finance expert.

In a message to applicants, Phillipson pointed to the ongoing curriculum and assessment review, and said Ofqual would play a "pivotal role in enacting changes that may result from the review's recommendations, placing an increasing

importance on innovative thinking, insight and research and strategic change".

"At the same time, Ofqual is working on critical areas, including its approach to regulating the use of artificial intelligence in the qualifications sector, improving the wider resilience of the system, and carefully considering the opportunities and risks of onscreen exams."

Sir Ian Bauckham was recently confirmed as permanent chief regulator of Ofqual. Dr Susan Tranter is its new chair.

Phillipson said she was "now seeking to appoint high calibre board members who can offer support and challenge to Ofqual's executive."

"The board members will be central to supporting executive decision-making and providing strong strategic aims and standards."

"We are seeking applicants with significant experience and expertise to bring to board discussions, who are committed to driving forward the work of the organisation."

Applications close on March 17.

Please let us know of any new faces leading your school, trust or education organisation by emailing news@schoolsweek.co.uk

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Profile

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | @LYDIACHSW



'Trainers still bang the teaching drum, no matter how broken they are'

NASBTT chief executive Emma Hollis tells Lydia Chantler-Hicks about guiding providers through the 'bruising' ITT review, and how we can fix 'dire' teacher recruitment

Emma Hollis lives a life of two very different halves.

When we meet, she has just travelled to London from rural Lincolnshire where she and her husband recently moved to fulfil their dream of setting up a smallholding. Their plans for their six-acre plot include chickens, pigs, cows, a pond, woodland and a kitchen garden.

Hollis documents their journey on social media, regaling followers with stories about the bucolic challenges of such an endeavour, like a field mouse who eats their mail and marauding rabbits who destroyed their new fruit trees.

But that side of her life feels worlds away from her day job, running the National Association of School-Based Teacher Trainers.

For that work, she still spends much of her time in London, engaging with the government and trying to ensure her members' views inform policy decisions.

So naturally when we meet it's at the tiny Prêt just yards from the Department for Education.

Most challenging professional period'

Hollis dives straight in, describing a turbulent five years for teacher trainers.

"It's been the most challenging professional period of my life," she says. "The most rewarding, in some ways. Also the most heartbreaking."

The sector had only just started to rally after "the horror" of the pandemic when, in 2021, the government unleashed its devastating initial teacher training (ITT) market review.

The review was "effectively a redundancy process for the entire sector" as providers were forced to re-apply for accreditation.

The lengthy written application "assess[ed] your ability to complete a form in the right way, use the right words". But "we don't believe that it

Profile: Emma Hollis

was a good proxy for finding quality," says Hollis.

"We know of providers who, weeks before, had got 'outstanding' Ofsted judgments that didn't get accreditation."

She recalls one particular conversation with a teacher trainer who missed out.

"She said to me, 'my husband's in end-of-life care, and I resent every single second I spent on this instead of being with him,'" recalls Hollis.

"We lost about a third of our membership. It was very painful, very bruising. We've lost fantastic people from the sector."

'Teacher trainers are exhausted'

Years of changing policy have left the sector "exhausted", but providers must remain "positive, upbeat, enthusiastic about the profession".

"We're the ones who are trying to attract people into the profession and trying to convince them that they've made the right choice and that this is the best job in the world," says Hollis.

The sector has "kept showing up", training teachers and being positive, "no matter how broken they were".

"I think in some ways that's our Achilles heel," says Hollis. "I think government does trade on that. They just rely on the fact that nobody's going to leave those kids in that classroom without somebody to educate and care for them."

Solving the recruitment crisis

Hollis doesn't mince her words about the teacher recruitment crisis.

"The position is dire," she says. Although the previous government "did care deeply" about tackling the crisis, she hopes the new one will take a fresh approach.

"We can't keep pulling the same levers," she warns.

In order to "move the needle" on recruitment, Hollis says we must remove the financial obstacles to becoming a teacher.

Those on tuition fee routes face costs of up to £9,535 "for the privilege of training to be a teacher.

"They've already taken on three years' worth of debt from their undergraduate degree.



'We lost a third of our membership, it was very bruising'

"Then we are saying to them 'if you want to be a teacher in our state schools, you've then got to take on another £9,000-plus... and by the way, you're not going to earn during that year either, with the exception of a few subjects that we will throw some bursary money at'."

Hollis believes this suggests teaching "isn't that important to us as a society, because society is not willing to pay for it".

It also pushes people towards more lucrative jobs where they can start earning straightaway.

"We should be saying, as a society, 'nobody should be taking on debt to train to be a teacher,'" she says. "I would also argue that if you make it a funded programme, you could even raise the bar for entry slightly higher."

Whether the Treasury would sign off on such a costly idea is another matter, "but you never know," says Hollis.

'I never thought I could afford to train as a teacher'

Finances almost prevented Hollis herself from becoming a teacher.

Raised in Pinner, north London, until she was 10, Hollis's family moved to Spain when a recession led to her stepfather losing his business.

The mortgage company took their London home, but they were "privileged" to have a holiday house they could move into.

"It must have been very distressing for my mum and stepdad," says Hollis. "But I thought it was marvellous. There was the swimming pool down the road and it was very sunny, and I had a wonderful time."

Hollis sat her GCSEs at an international school in Spain before returning to the UK to live with her father. She left home at 17, finishing her A-levels at Aylesbury High School while living with her boyfriend and friends.

Profile: Emma Hollis

She began studying at the University of Birmingham, but without financial support quickly racked up more than £13,000 of debt, which left her “terrified”.

Switching to the Open University, she completed her child psychology degree with first-class honours while working various jobs.

Teaching “had always been at the back of my mind, but I never thought I could afford it,” says Hollis.

But while pregnant with her daughter, she saw an advert in the paper for the Graduate Teacher Programme – a new pathway that would allow her to earn while training.

“I never would have been a teacher otherwise,” she says. “There’s no way I could have done what tuition fee-paying teachers have to do now. I just couldn’t have afforded it. We had a mortgage, we had a baby on the way.”

Hollis initially became a full-time primary school teacher before moving to a part-time role at Two Mile Ash primary school in Milton Keynes, where she had trained, so she could spend more time with her daughter.

She later took over the department that ran initial teacher training, joined NASBTT’s management team in January 2016 and took over as executive director the following year, then CEO in 2024.

Today’s teachers face greater challenges

Hollis reflects on her own time as a new teacher, facing “30 little people, who all have their own stuff going on in their lives, and trying to make them learn maths when they don’t want to”.

“It’s a hard thing to do, but there was joy in it,” she recalls.

In contrast, today’s teachers are grappling with greater challenges than ever.

“Trainees are having to deal with more extreme forms of behaviour... with the mental health crisis, with poverty, with children with suicidal tendencies,” says Hollis.

“AI, social media, bullying... all of the massive issues we know are there in schools.”



‘We’ve lost fantastic people from the sector’

More preparation needed for SEND support

Hollis was involved in developing the ITT core content framework (CCF), and she calls it “a fine piece of work”.

“[But] it only focuses on teaching standards, and they only really focus on educating children with curriculum stuff.”

She says providers frequently approach her, asking how they can “better prepare” their trainees for the realities of today’s classrooms.

“[They say] ‘we’ve only got nine months. We still need to do all of this CCF. [Trainees] still need to be able to teach whatever they’re trained to teach. But I feel like I’m under-preparing them.’”

Meanwhile the government’s plan to increase SEND inclusion in mainstream will mean teachers need to be better-educated in dealing with more complex needs, placing further strain on the already-bulging training period.

“How can my members train somebody in nine months to be ready to do that?” she asks. “It is just impossible.”

The new initial teacher training and early career framework (ITTECF) aims to place more of a focus on SEND and mental health. But Hollis still feels

nine months “is just too short a period of time” to do this.

“We’re just heaping on more and more, and the ITT providers at the bottom of all this are saying, ‘but what could we take out?’”

Primary teachers, she points out, must already be trained across 11 subjects. “Something’s got to give.”

Schools should be ‘staffed differently’

To turn things around, Hollis thinks we should “staff schools differently”.

“We’ve got to decide what we want schools to be, and then we have to staff them accordingly, and not just assume that a teacher who is coming to educate can do all the other stuff as well – without any training, without any support, without any supervision,” says Hollis.

But solving the issue isn’t easy, and won’t happen fast.

“We’re not going to get there in this Parliament,” says Hollis.

“That’s often what you’re fighting against... selling stuff to government. If you can’t show it’s going to be achieved within the Parliament, it’s almost impossible.”

Curriculum
ConversationDO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UKSARAH
BAKERFounder and chief
executive,
TEAM Education TrustRACHEL
WATSONChief education and
operations officer,
TEAM Education TrustHow to make curriculum and
assessment more inclusive

Making the flexibilities enjoyed by specialist settings available to all would benefit all pupils – not just those with special educational needs, write Sarah Baker and Rachel Watson

The curriculum review is a unique opportunity to embrace a future where inclusive education is the standard for all learners, not just the exception.

To achieve this, we need to remove the barriers that have traditionally constrained our thinking and to ensure all young people have access to a curriculum that harnesses their potential and builds on their capabilities.

In that, there is much to learn from the great practice in special schools and alternative provision (AP) settings.

Flexibility and connection

Specialist settings have long enjoyed a level of autonomy with regards to curriculum delivery and age-related expectations. With the ongoing rise in SEND, mainstream schools should also have the benefit of this type of flexibility.

By allowing for more cross-curricular links, personalised learning experiences and a focus on individual progress rather than static age-related expectations, we can create a more inclusive education system that values every student's unique path to success.

In our schools, we often take a holistic approach to curriculum delivery, combining subjects and providing inspiring hooks to create meaningful learning experiences that are relevant to each student's needs and cognitive development level.

This can be as simple as blending literacy and life skills, offering project-based learning that spans multiple disciplines or creating inter-connected curricular plans. Our sustainability curriculum, for example, encompasses learning from across multiple domains.

This approach allows our students to see the connections between what they are learning and the world around them. It also provides opportunities to address their individual needs by building on their interests and strengths. This means our learners flourish in ways that a traditional, one-size-fits-all curriculum cannot accommodate.

Allowing mainstream schools to adopt a more fluid approach to the curriculum and to adjust learning targets based on a student's developmental needs rather than their chronological age could be transformative.

Beyond academic outcomes

In special schools, academic outcomes are just one piece of the progress puzzle. We recognise students' development across a range of areas, including social skills, communication, independence and wellbeing.



“ We need more focus on progress rather than age

Crucially, this attention to a broader range of capabilities means we are focused on celebrating what our learners can do rather than consistently highlighting what they can't.

It is for this reason that we created our Holistic Tracker, which allows us to better understand how a student is doing across a wide range of areas. Among others, these include preparation for adulthood (including managing transitions and communication effectively with unfamiliar people), attendance, parental engagement, and collaboration with peers.

These are key factors in students going on to achieve the best possible outcomes in later life. They also inform a genuinely inclusive approach to curriculum intent, implementation and impact.

Assessment flexibility

Ultimately, assessment is how young people demonstrate their achievements, and exams are not the only way to do this. We are currently collaborating with other colleagues in the AP and SEND sectors to explore how we can report and celebrate the diverse successes of our pupils.

This includes moving beyond conventional exam-based outcomes

and considering richer measures of success, such as improvements in health, wellbeing and engagement. These broader measures of achievement offer a fuller picture of a student's development and give more meaningful insight into their progress.

Without doubt, an assessment model that accommodates a holistic approach to what progress looks like across the nation for students with similar needs and starting points would drive inclusive practice.

This may mean variations in how accountability is measured and more nuanced national benchmarks, but that's a small price to pay.

To achieve its aim of high standards for all, the government will need to deliver an assessment system that not only reflects the capabilities of young people with SEND but can hold all schools properly accountable for their progress. The SEND and AP sectors must be active partners in developing such a model.

At its heart, the bold vision we need is one where SEND provision is no longer a bolt-on to or an opt-out from the national curriculum. Instead, the great practice in our settings could and should be the basis on which to build a truly inclusive system, irrespective of setting.

Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
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ELIZABETH FUNGE

Assistant director of education,
East Sussex County Council

The schools bill will allow LAs to ensure all children can thrive

Contrary to criticisms levelled at Labour's bill, it will make it possible to take the first steps towards more inclusive local responses to rising need, explains Elizabeth Funge

Broadly speaking, local authorities will welcome the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. It clarifies some key areas of our work with schools and strengthens our role in local communities. But it is only a first step in sharpening our collective focus on the most vulnerable children.

In East Sussex, we have created strong partnerships with and between our schools. Over a number of years we have shaped our shared vision for education and built a school-led system. We have clarified the different roles we play and continue to build relationships based on trust and transparency.

Outcomes for children in the county, especially the most vulnerable, are not yet where we want them to be. We have collectively challenged ourselves to raise the bar and, as a local authority, we have shaped our role in the system as champion for the children who most need us to be their advocate.

Across all our partners and schools, we are ambitious for children with SEND, those who

are looked after and those who experience disadvantage. Our vision for 2030 is that all schools will be rooted in their local communities and reflect the communities they serve.

However, we experience different challenges in meeting this shared ambition. The pressure on resources is real and increasing, our accountabilities are not aligned across the system, and demand continues to outstrip the supply of services and funding.

The bill acknowledges these challenges and provides an important starting point for how we might address them.

A key section of the bill is the creation of 'new duties for schools and local authorities to cooperate' on admissions and place planning. As the bill highlights, and as has been our experience in East Sussex, schools and local authorities do generally work well together on these important processes.

However, there are times when this is not the case and where the ability of local authorities to discharge their statutory powers has been frustrated. This is to the detriment of vulnerable children and young people.

Providing more clarity and aligning our accountabilities will help us work together to make the right decisions locally about school places and admissions.



“Accountabilities are not aligned across the system”

Moreover, the bill's emphasis on sharing information and productive dialogue is truly welcome. It creates an environment of cooperation where differences can be explored and addressed in the interest of children and young people.

This climate will help us to prioritise the right things and start to turn the tide for the increasing number of young people who are outside of school. In this regard, the bill provides some important protections for young people.

We face significant challenges in our county on attendance, exclusions, elective home education, section 19 requests, availability of specialist placements and alternative provision.

All of this means that some of our most vulnerable children are not regularly in school. This has widespread consequences for young people, their families and their communities. It also creates further pressures on public finances down the line.

Many areas have developed local, collaborative solutions to

this challenge; in East Sussex we have multi-agency 'inclusion partnerships' where schools bring complex cases for review. However, the bill's provisions for children who are not in school are a positive and important step forward in making this a focus across the system.

Having said that, there is an opportunity to go further and create a national system that truly helps us address these challenges. Indeed, proposals relating to reform of children's social care will depend in large part on ensuring that children are regularly attending school.

Of course, each part of the system needs to be supported and resourced to do its job well, but it's only by working together that we can ensure support reaches the children who need it most in an effective and timely manner.

Local government can only play its full role in delivering that ambition by working in partnership with all schools. The bill creates a legislative framework that will enable this cooperation.

Opinion

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**BEN
DAVIS**

Headteacher, St Ambrose Barlow
RC High School

Maintained schools are key to ending our omni-crisis

Failing to hear the voices of the maintained sector is at least partly to blame for the cluster of crises gripping the educational system, writes Ben Davis

The co-ordinated voice of maintained schools has been missing from recent educational discourse. This is a shame; we have plenty to say and can offer much from which others can learn. In fact, our exclusion from policy thinking is at least partly to blame for the proliferation of sector-wide crises.

In contrast to the narrative of previous governments, maintained schools express the compelling vision for children and young people that is implicit in this government's opportunity mission: education in the service of the people.

There are, as Bridget Phillipson has deftly asserted, many academy trusts that have done excellent work over the past 10 years. But so too has the maintained sector, without being wedded to corporate models of school improvement.

Take the school I lead. We have travelled the hard road from 'requires improvement' to 'good' with the support of our local authority and a fellow local Catholic maintained school.

All those who have navigated this protracted and labyrinthine journey will know well the difficulties

of balancing sustained, ethical improvement against relentless, sometimes hostile accountability that incentivises quick, shallow wins.

For years, the level of threat linked to this accountability has been existential. Perform or be academised.

Faced now with a fevered consultation on Ofsted reform, maintained schools that have met the spectre of forced academisation are better placed than many to respond. Our profession cannot risk being supine on this matter.

The truth is that most, if not all maintained schools don't need to shapeshift any more than academies need to revert to maintained status (although some have legitimate reason to argue otherwise). This thinking focuses our energies in the wrong place, prizing ideology over outcomes.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill adopts a much more cautious approach to involuntary academy conversion. About time too. Threatening one part of the sector with being converted into another is a nonsense that has nurtured one of the many false dichotomies with which education is bedevilled.

Academisation is not the medicine that sick maintained schools need. Schools and their successes are made by people, not structures. Moreover, collaboration between schools, without coercion, is



“ We represent the essence of place-based public service

where effective school and system improvement work occurs.

Some like to claim that the past 15 years have been an unmitigated success. They have not. Any gains have long been overshadowed by a gargantuan omni-crisis worsened by systemic fragmentation and incoherence. Complex problems demand solutions of equal sophistication and there is strength in diversity.

Maintained schools have a unique place in our system; one that needs to be celebrated rather than diminished. We embody the sense of civic purpose and virtue that trusts' representative bodies are increasingly keen to claim for academies.

We radiate the visceral warmth of linked arms, not the chill of isolated fortresses. We represent the essence of undiluted, place-based public service; embedded local leadership in which generations place their trust.

This is the model that exists in Salford, for example, where a muscular commitment to addressing disadvantage has evolved out of the challenges of the pandemic. Secondary academies and maintained schools in the city

are bound together in networks that examine issues unflinchingly and take action, including the allocation of resources.

Cooperation like this exemplifies how the maintained sector articulates partnership between schools, families and communities. This is vital to safeguarding important values that underpin social cohesion, values that are needed now more than ever.

Such stewardship does not require that schools exist within a group that is 'a single legal entity.' Instead, schools of all types work in transparent and determined concert for the good of local people, as democracy demands.

At the heart of Salford's city-wide approach is a genuine respect for difference that appreciates [ITALS] all schools as net contributors to system capacity. It is notable that as this strategy has developed over the past three years, the city's educational metrics have gone in the right direction.

It seems connection and collaboration without coercion are good for all. We need a lot more of them to meet the challenges we now face – and that means valuing voices from every part of the sector.

YAMINA
BIBICommissioner,
The Teaching Commission

We must address racism to solve the recruitment and retention crisis

The sector is missing out on a huge pool of talent due to its failure to tackle racism in a meaningful way, explains Yamina Bibi. Here's what needs to happen

The teaching profession cannot afford to scale back Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work as others have in response to political shifts. Addressing our recruitment and retention crisis demands that we acknowledge the experiences of global majority teachers and leaders.

Government data from June last year shows that 37.4 per cent of primary and 36.6 per cent of secondary school pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds.

However, 2022 research from the NFER found that while people from Asian, Black, mixed, and other ethnic backgrounds are over-represented in initial teacher training (ITT) applications, they are disproportionately likely to be rejected. This higher incidence of rejection continues throughout their careers, as is reflected in their under-representation in promoted posts.

Despite this clear trend, there is no system-wide approach to tackling racial inequities in education.

Institutional silence

In the third meeting of the Teaching Commission, research from professors Vini Lander,

Heather J. Smith and Dr Alison Wiggins highlighted a systemic failure to address racism at all policy levels. This significantly impacts recruitment, retention and racial literacy within the profession.

Key policies such as the teacher standards, the core content framework, the early career framework and the inspection framework all fail to mention race, racism or anti-racism. As Prof Smith noted, this omission signals to institutions that racism is not a priority, making it less likely to be addressed.

In addition, racism is often framed as an individual issue rather than a structural one, meaning systemic barriers remain unchallenged.

A comprehensive anti-racism framework, such as the one commissioned by the NEU with Newcastle University, could guide ITT providers in embedding anti-racist practices. Schools and training providers should adopt such frameworks to ensure meaningful change.

Prejudiced from the start

Global majority trainees frequently experience racism and microaggressions during their training, including being treated as second-class citizens, subjected to harmful assumptions and having their experiences dismissed.

Some report racist incidents only to be told by course tutors that nothing can be done and that it is



“ Key sector policies all fail to mention race or racism

"part of the experience".

If new entrants are treated this way, it is no surprise that long-serving global majority teachers experience similar discrimination, limiting their career progression. The issue is not a shortage of global majority teachers but a system that fails to support and retain them.

To combat this, Dr Wiggins recommends that schools and universities explicitly commit to anti-racism in partnership agreements, ensure clear reporting mechanisms for racist incidents, and involve race equity specialists in handling complaints.

The burden of illiteracy

Those from Black and global majority groups bear the burden of exposing and challenging racism. I have experienced this myself, and it is an exhausting and often thankless job.

Prof Lander highlighted that the under-representation of global majority teachers has been a "pervasive and perpetual issue for at least 40 years". And yet, the profession has failed to tackle the issue in a meaningful way.

Why has the profession tolerated this for so long? Why does institutional racism in teaching and

ITT remain unaddressed? Simply put, our profession privileges whiteness, and challenging that requires white teachers and leaders to recognise their role as allies and advocates.

Racism in ITT must be tackled and I am honoured to lead a project for The Chartered College of Teaching, Chiltern Learning Trust, and Being Luminary, funded by Mission 44, to do just that.

Our goal is to increase the proportion of global majority teachers, and we are working with schools and training providers to deliver expert coaching and personalised training to identify and address explicit and implicit racism.

But the responsibility for this does not and cannot lie solely with global majority teachers. They are not missing from the ranks of applicants. They are dealing with systemic barriers that exclude them from the profession and hamper their opportunities to thrive.

We must address the daily microaggressions, career roadblocks and institutional failures that perpetuate this situation. Failing to do so harms them, harms our schools, and ultimately harms our pupils.

SEND Solutions

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



SAM STRICKLAND

Principal of The Duston School and CEO of Luminara Education Trust

How to build an internal AP that works

Sam Strickland shares the key lessons he's learned from setting up an internal alternative provision – from reallocating funding to creating a comprehensive offer

When it comes to supporting our most vulnerable students, the traditional approach of relying on external alternative provision (AP) often falls short.

These students, many of whom are at risk of permanent exclusion, need a personalised, supportive environment that addresses their unique emotional, social and academic challenges. Too often, they fall through the cracks instead.

We've experienced this ourselves. Pupils on external AP placements became disconnected from our school, and vice versa. The quality and consistency of the support they received was often out of our control.

That's why we built our own internal AP and moved almost all of them (about 60) back into our school. Our Positive Impact Centre now supports 100 students each year.

It is a place where we can offer a structured, nurturing environment, where our students can feel safe and gain the skills and confidence to re-engage with the curriculum and re-enter mainstream education.

Crucially, they are still very much part of our school community. Last year, 34 per cent of our pupils

accessed the provision. This year, 21 per cent have already benefited from it.

But building that capacity requires careful planning and huge commitment. As many other schools look to develop their own, here's what we've learned.

The money is there

The financial side of setting up an internal AP can be daunting, but it's not impossible.

It took us about 18 months, from looking at our finances, ensuring governors were happy with our plans, appointing a manager and then creating a physical space for the centre.

We astutely reallocated our SEND funds and clawed back approximately £1 million that was being spent on pupils attending external alternative provision and on teaching assistants who were not being used as much as they could be.

This allowed us to ensure that every penny was spent on bespoke services that were tailored to our students' needs. This money has been pooled centrally to allow us to intelligently fund our own in-house provision.

Recruit and retrain

No AP can be better than the people running it, so it's essential to recruit passionate staff who are genuinely interested in working with vulnerable young people. Among



“ One of the biggest risks is that it becomes a 'dumping ground' ”

our staff, we found many who were deeply committed to working with students with social, emotional and mental health needs.

All have received extensive training in a range of approaches from trauma-informed practice to emotional coaching to strategies for supporting students with anxiety, anger, and low self-esteem.

In addition, they have access to regular supervision and wellbeing workshops – each is on a two-year training cycle so that they feel confident in their roles and have the latest strategies to support our students.

Be comprehensive

Many APs have a specialty, but internal provision can and should offer a comprehensive package of support. Our centre is built around several core strands of support.

We provide a safe and structured environment for all students who need time away from mainstream lessons and targeted support for students facing anxiety, depression and other mental health challenges.

We give students access to counselling and professional therapeutic support as well as more intensive mental health

interventions when required.

We also offer bespoke assistance for students with English as an additional language, and subject specialist teachers work with students who are at risk of falling behind academically.

Re-engage, don't remove

One of the biggest risks of setting up an internal AP is for it to become a 'dumping ground' for students who are difficult to manage in a mainstream setting.

Our Positive Impact Centre isn't a place students are removed to; it's a place where they receive the support they need to re-engage with learning.

And doing so has been transformative. Students who once faced exclusion are returning to classrooms. Staff are better equipped to support them. And our culture is more inclusive.

I am in no doubt that this has been a contributory factor in us becoming one of the most improved schools in the country and a national Behaviour Hub Lead School.

Setting up our internal AP has been one of the most rewarding decisions we've made. Don't be afraid to take the same step.

THE CONVERSATION LISTENING IN ON THE DIGITAL STAFFROOM

**Shekeila
Scarlett**

Chair of governors,
Stoke Newington
School and
Sixth Form



BRINGING AI INTO PLAY

If you've read any of my previous entries for this column, you'll know I have a keen interest in artificial intelligence (AI) and a growing curiosity about how its evolution will shape the future of education. So when I came across Mark Anderson's insightful LinkedIn blog, which reflects on the UK Government's recently released **AI playbook**, I was excited to dive in.

For some context, the AI playbook was created to help the public sector better understand the potential of AI, its limitations, and the risks it presents. It provides vital guidance on how AI technologies can be deployed responsibly and effectively, with a key focus on safeguarding security, wellbeing and public trust.

In his blog, Anderson offers a balanced overview of the playbook and makes a compelling case about the need for schools to develop their own AI playbook. He suggests that schools should adopt a framework similar to the government's playbook to ensure the responsible and beneficial use of AI in education.

A central takeaway from the government's



playbook is the emphasis on AI literacy and training. Anderson highlights the importance of schools providing training that empowers both educators and students to navigate AI tools responsibly – something I strongly agree with.

But Anderson doesn't stop there. He outlines four forward-thinking actions that schools could take to better integrate AI. The suggestions are long-term, but starting the conversations now could have a profound impact on school communities.

In fact, I'd go so far as to say these actions would help schools pave the way for AI to become an asset in their setting rather than a challenge.

PUTTING THE CURRICULUM TO WORK

Marking National Careers Week, Careers and Enterprise Company CEO, Oli de Botton's blog on the importance of modern careers education and how it can boost apprenticeships is an engaging read.



Echoing [an article from Ark's Erika Nabeshima in Schools Week](#), De Botton stresses the need for early career education, starting in primary school and continuing throughout all school years.

Unfortunately, with growing pressures in education, the quality of career advice has suffered.

Reflecting on my own experiences, I recall being strongly discouraged from pursuing an apprenticeship in Year 11 and instead pushed toward further education, despite my own reservations. Those concerns were validated when I dropped out of college after a year and went straight into full-time work at 17.

The blog also highlights how work experience is vital for developing job

preferences and skills. My own two-week work experience at a knitting shop in London led to my first part-time job as a sales assistant. However, it did little to support my education or career goals, which at the time were aimed at social work or becoming a London Underground train driver.

I particularly appreciated how de Botton emphasises the need for targeted support for disadvantaged students. While I try to avoid the 'shoulda, woulda, coulda' mindset, I can't help but feel that, had I received such support, my educational journey (at the very least) would have been entirely different.

SEND IN THE EXPERTS

Ensuring that youth voices are at the heart of reform has been a priority for Dame Rachel de Souza since she took office as children's commissioner four years ago. As the government announced a SEND white paper this week, de Souza's latest blog shows her priorities have not shifted.

The blog describes the creation of a panel of young people with lived experience of the SEND system. It then goes on to review their recent meeting with key stakeholders, during which several vital topics were discussed, including early support, family-school collaboration and transition points.

What stood out most for me in de Souza's reflection were the powerful quotes from the SEND panel members and their focus on making the system more inclusive and personalised for all.

Valuing young people's voices in such reforms is something I passionately advocate for. After all, how can we improve a system without listening to those it directly

impacts? This is a brilliant move by the commissioner, and I look forward to hearing more about the outcomes.



Dame Rachel de Souza

Click the links to access
the blogs and podcasts



The Knowledge

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



How are teachers navigating the AI revolution?

Jonathan Park, Head of AI, Twinkl

Echoing school leaders' concerns raised in these pages last week, Twinkl's new survey of over 6,500 teachers finds rapid adoption of generative AI is offset by a lack of guidance, uneven adoption and some well-founded worries about the technology's risks.

According to National Literacy Trust surveys, less than one-third of teachers had used generative AI in 2023. By 2024, this had risen to nearly half. Our own survey, conducted this January, found that 60 per cent are now making use of AI for work purposes, with over one-fifth using it daily.

This is hardly surprising amid well-documented challenges including high workloads, intense admin demands and poor work-life balance. Indeed, our survey shows that AI growth is very much a bottom-up revolution to meet these challenges.

However, it also highlights the shortcomings of this situation.

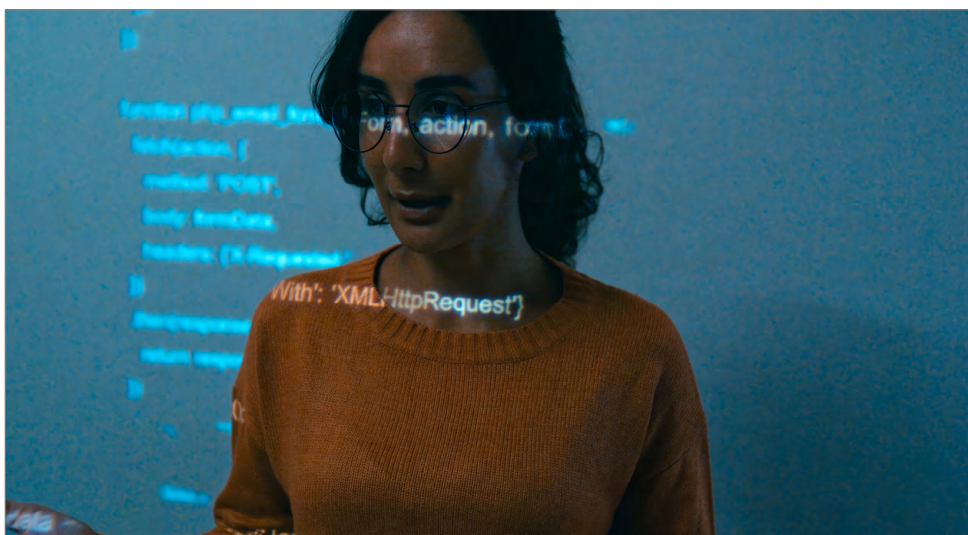
Teacher optimism

According to our data, two-thirds of teachers think AI will have a positive impact on educational standards. This is a much more upbeat view than that of the general UK population. A government survey published in December found around four in 10 adults expect a positive impact to society from AI, while three in 10 anticipate a negative one.

And it's clear why. Generative AI is particularly adept at supporting teachers with the types of work they need the most help with, from creating lessons to performing admin tasks and writing reports. Indeed, fewer teachers are leveraging AI in their private lives (43 per cent) than in school (60 per cent).

In school, however, 83 per cent of teachers see AI as a time-saver. Given Teacher Tapp's report in October that time spent on administrative tasks is the second highest cause of teacher stress (topped only by student behaviour), the potential benefits of AI are attractive.

For those who are adopting it, AI is already saving significant time. We find that 64 per cent of frequent (weekly or daily) users are saving between one and five hours a week. Nine



'Teachers adopting it are doing so off their own backs'

per cent snip more than five hours, and a not insignificant three per cent claim to be taking back over 10 hours.

This is a considerable amount of time that can be reinvested elsewhere, whether at work or at home.

Lack of support

As exciting as AI's potential is, however, teachers adopting it are doing so largely off their own backs. A vast majority (76 per cent) are yet to receive any training or substantial guidance from their school.

AI is still a new and rapidly-changing technology, so it's no surprise that many teachers feel under-informed. The sector needs to get going fast on providing accurate information regarding which AI tools to use, as well as training on how best to implement the technology and on what tasks.

The government has made a good start, issuing guidance around using AI safely and responsibly in education, as well as setting safety expectations for educational products. Elsewhere, its recently announced AI Opportunities Action Plan specifically champions AI's use in education – stating that it will 'allow

teachers to personalise lessons to children's needs' and 'reduce paperwork for teachers'.

In our survey, a sizeable 58 per cent of teachers agreed with these remarks. However, that leaves clear room for improvement. The survey also revealed a whopping 81 per cent do not believe that AI is sufficiently regulated.

What next?

The Department for Education needs to offer a clear voice on AI, from making training as accessible as possible to shaping wider government regulation. All this will boost confidence, not just among teachers but among parents and pupils too.

No technology can replace good governance, sound leadership or great teachers. However, the early evidence suggests AI is already helping the sector overcome some long-running challenges.

The benefits of AI can be realised faster and by a greater number of teachers. It will require everyone in the sector – from headteachers to heads of state – to pull in the same direction.

Read the full results of Twinkl's survey [here](#)

Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

MONDAY

Good news for Lib Dem education spokesperson Munira Wilson. She started her contribution on a debate about Labour's private school VAT policy by apologising if she "seemed a little distracted".

"I have just found out that my daughter got her first choice of secondary school—a state school, I should say."

Hurrah!

On the issue of private schools closing and some areas being overwhelmed by independent pupils moving over to state schools, parliamentary secretary to the Treasury Torsten Bell gave them short shrift.

However, he did say HMRC is "working hard" to support schools with the change, adding a "dedicated mailbox for queries has also been made available to schools and their tax representatives". We're sure that will solve all their problems.

TUESDAY

It's great fun watching the Conservatives make the same criticisms that Labour did of them for all those years.

Baroness Barran today asked why the review of RSHE statutory guidance wasn't published nine months after a consultation closed.

Good try, but we remember when never responding to consultations on time was a favourite Tory trick.

Anyway, skills minister Baroness

Smith said stakeholder engagement (which started in December) is ongoing, with plans to convene a roundtable for children and young people suggesting it has a while to go yet.

"The broadest range of voices will help us to come to the right place on this," she added.

WEDNESDAY

The selection of the left-wing ex Fire Brigades Union boss Matt Wrack as the NASUWT executive's nominee as its next general secretary has raised eyebrows this week.

Even some senior NASUWT staff were blindsided by the announcement. Wrack is a controversial figure who has faced questions about the FBU's use of non-disclosure agreements and lost his role at the union in an election upset earlier this year.

It's also the first time the executive has nominated someone without an education background, quite the move for a union that proudly boasts it's THE teachers' union.

But if Wrack is appointed (there hasn't been a contested election for decades), it will no doubt prompt renewed calls for a merger with the National Education Union, a proposal supported by many on the NEU's executive, but so far resisted by NASUWT leaders.

Wrack is understood to be a key ally of NEU general secretary

Daniel Kebede. Maybe calls for amalgamation will land on more sympathetic ears?

One person likely to be less sympathetic is Bridget Phillipson, who will see a moderate union leader replaced by someone who could be much more vocally opposed.

THURSDAY

It's the news we were all waiting for: Phillipson's favourite book! For World Book Day, the ed sec took to social media to share her favourite read (well, she couldn't decide so she "cheated" and choose two).

The first was Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. The second was Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

"I haven't read many books more than once, because I generally think life's too short and there's so many other books out there to read, but I made exception for *Wuthering Heights*," BP said.



Charter.hr

Financial Controller

North Dulwich

£55,000-£60,000

Closing date: 20th March 2025

Looking for a job in finance that really adds up?
Where you can really make a difference?
Then search no further....

About the Role

We are seeking to appoint a dedicated, well-qualified and skilled individual to join our successful and growing Trust. This is a key role, overseeing the finance function and ensuring regulatory compliance, as well as working in partnership with a distinct group of schools.

[Click here for more information](#)



Killigrew Primary & Nursery School

Job title: Headteacher

Location: St Albans

Start date: September 2025

Salary: L15 – L24 Fringe
(£71,665 - £89,033)

Full time

Closing date:

Friday 21st March 2025 at 9am

Shortlisting date:

Thursday 27th March 2025

Interview date:

Thursday 3rd April 2025

Job details

At Killigrew Primary and Nursery School in St. Albans, we nurture bright futures with an inclusive, forward-thinking approach to learning. Our well-resourced environment supports both pupils and staff to thrive.

Joining us means leading a school that values diversity, embraces technology, and continuously enhances its curriculum. Our engaged parent community and thriving PTA foster collaboration, while extra-curricular activities enrich every child's experience. We prioritise cultural capital, preparing pupils for academic and personal success.

As our new headteacher, you'll bring vision and innovation, driving the school forward. You'll foster collaboration, embrace technology, and tackle challenges with tenacity. A commitment to mental health, well-being, and strong communication is essential.

In return, we offer:

- A stable team and eager learners.
- Supportive parents and financial stability.
- Flexible working and freedom to innovate.
- A collaborative, inclusive environment where you can make a real impact.

Deputy Chief Executive Officer (DCEO)

ACET is multi-academy trust with over 5,500 students/pupils on roll across twelve academies in primary and secondary phases. The vast majority of ACET academies are located in communities with a high level of deprivation across Rotherham, Sheffield and Derbyshire; all but two academies have a higher than national average rate of children in receipt of free school meals.

We are looking for an inspirational and talented leader, who will work closely with the CEO to continue our journey to excellence, embracing our vision and values.

We are looking for applicants who have:

- The ability to lead and inspire others and the bring people along with you
- Values aligned to those of ACET
- A track record of improving attainment
- A clear understanding of the current education landscape
- Ability to communicate well with staff, parents/carers, students/pupils and external partners

The successful candidate will work with a committed CEO, Trust board, an experience central Trust team, skilled Principals and leaders and high performing educators.

If you are confident that you have the skills, drive and vision to support the CEO in achieving our vision, we sincerely hope that you will apply for this post.

[Click here to apply](#)



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.

[Click here for more information](#)



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. 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](#)



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

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

Alternatively contact Leanne Auton on **07815 028 548** or email Leanne.Auton@northyorks.gov.uk

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