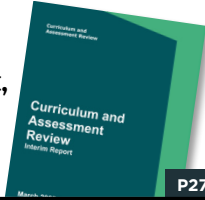




Curriculum Conversation

A landmark report, but the hard work lies ahead



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Should we exclude pupils for parental abuse?



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Ofsted considers letting schools rate inspectors



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SCHOOL FUNDING STORM STRIKES



Page 4

Revealed: true cost of Labour's axed academy growth fund

- Trusts bid for £44m to help support 660 schools before cash cut
- Largest trust says capacity pot axe 'harmed' children's education
- 'Dozens of schools could have been getting sustained support'

SCHOOLS
WEEK

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Tim Oates was the architect of Michael Gove's knowledge-rich curriculum reforms. The fact that he calls Labour's interim curriculum review a "genuinely landmark document" speaks volumes (pages 27 and 28).

Despite lots of unsubstantiated rumours about what may be in the review, the final report focuses on the evidence, promises to build on successes and will only introduce change where it can improve attainment and equity.

There is no ideological pandering. It has avoided the political lure of widespread changes just so the new lot can be seen to be different to the old lot. Stick with what works, refine what doesn't.

By doing this, review chair Becky Francis has disarmed the Conservative critics (see cartoon) waiting in the wings to further the narrative that Labour is soft on standards and destroying education.

This is just the easy bit, though. So far, we only have the direction of travel.

The difficult bit, producing effective policy, comes next. Hopefully Francis can conjure up the same again.

The fact that school leaders have had to publicly support one of their colleagues amid criticism he should not have been elected to a public role solely because of his religion is a sad indictment of where our country seems to be.

Legitimate scrutiny and criticism of people holding important public roles is part of a well-functioning democracy. Leaders taking up such roles understand and appreciate this.

But the criticism relating to Sir Hamid Patel becoming Ofsted chair is vile and unfounded. His record leading some of the most successful schools speaks for itself, as do his wider personal qualities which more than qualify him for the position.

The consequence of this sort of abuse will only lead to more high-quality people turning down important roles. Why would they bother? It is something already happening among MPs.

Our country should celebrate that anyone, of any background and faith, can succeed. Many of us do.

But few of us are equipped to make sure that sentiment prevails against the barrage of hate that will only increase in the coming years.

Most read online this week:

- 1** [Sir Hamid Patel appointed interim Ofsted chair](#)
- 2** ['I'd like to see SEND label retired', says inclusion tsar Tom Rees](#)
- 3** [Curriculum review signals primary content cut and fewer GCSE exams](#)
- 4** [Exams volume, EBacc and 'improving' SATs: 14 curriculum review reforms](#)
- 5** [Revealed: The academy CEO pay premium](#)

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INVESTIGATION: FUNDING

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Funding storm prepares to crash into schools

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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A gathering funding storm is due to crash down on schools this year as budgets are squeezed by several headwinds.

Ministers this week admitted there is not enough headroom in school budgets to cover staff pay rises next year, meaning leaders face the prospect of making more cuts.

Meanwhile, although the government will provide £1 billion to cover schools' increased national insurance contributions, some say the grant falls short by as much as 35 per cent.

Pupil premium next year will also not keep pace with rising costs.

The triple funding whammy comes after Schools Week revealed last week how leaders receiving funding letters had been surprised to see budgets would grow by just 0.5 per cent next year, once the effect of previous pay and pensions rises is taken into account.

"No one expected austerity in education to exist under a Labour government," Daniel Kebede, the National Education Union leader, said. "But schools are facing a crisis in funding."

"We hope the chancellor changes course, otherwise they will be the first Labour government to cut education since Callaghan – and it didn't end very well for them."

Many have also pointed out how the funding squeeze runs counter to the aim of ministers to make mainstream schools more inclusive.

Stephen Morales, chief executive of the Institute of School Business Leadership, said: "Schools usually cut back-office costs first, but teaching assistants second."

"If the policy intention is to be more inclusive, to narrow the gap between the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged – and you're potentially decimating the support staff element because of the cost pressures – then it's difficult to see how that's going to work."

Last year it emerged that three-quarters of primary schools had been forced to cut teaching assistant numbers, despite the continued rise in pupils with special educational needs. The government's



school costs technical note, published this week, stated that schools will only be able to afford a staff pay rise of about 1.3 per cent next year. Ministers have recommended a teacher pay rise of 2.8 per cent.

It also revealed that schools were actually underfunded in the current financial year. Funding for mainstream schools rose by 7.1 per cent – which included funding to cover the 5.5 per cent pay rise. But nationally costs rose by 7.7 per cent.

Meanwhile, the government will provide just over £1 billion in a grant to cover the rise in national insurance contributions from 13.8 per cent to 15 per cent in April. The funding is based on the number of pupils of different characteristics that a school has.

The Department for Education provided a calculator tool so leaders could work out how much NICs funding they would receive. But Julia Harnden, funding specialist at the ASCL leaders' union, said "early indications suggest shortfalls ranging from around 10 to 35 per cent."

"This represents large sums of money that schools must now account for and only adds to the financial pressure that they are already under."

The problem with allocating funding based on pupil numbers is that it won't always match up with actual staff spending, said shadow education minister Neil O'Brien.

"It all just makes the existing issues about funding growing more slowly than costs more severe," he added.

Benedicte Yue, chief financial officer at River Learning Trust,

said: "This piecemeal approach to funding is too reactive and does not help with long-term planning [or] budget stability."

Jake Richardson, chief financial officer at ONE Academy Trust, pointed out that trusts would have to start paying the increased contributions next month, but would not receive funding until September. "This on top of the shortfall in funding is absolutely devastating for the sector," he said.

Gavin Bailey, head of finance at Swale Academies Trust, posted that "our backs are against the wall."

"Reserves can only be spent once and, based on the national benchmarking reports, most of us have already eaten into those in the past couple of years."

He said people would "lose their jobs, and those that are left will feel more overworked and undervalued. Student outcomes will suffer."

Jonathan Georgy, chief operating officer at the Education Partnership Trust, said the "challenge of balancing the budget for 2025-26 is the toughest one yet in 10 years of education."

The DfE has also confirmed that pupil premium funding for schools will rise by around 2.3 per cent next year. But schools' costs are due to rise by 3.6 per cent.

A government spokesperson said they "recognise the challenges individual schools are facing, but the dire fiscal situation we inherited means that tough decisions are needed".



Daniel Kebede



Stephen Morales



Julia Harnden

INVESTIGATION: MATS

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Trusts bid for £44m growth cash before scheme axed

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

More than 200 trusts bid for £44 million of government funding to help them grow and often take over struggling schools – before the fund was dumped by the government.

More than 660 schools were involved in applications for the final window of the trust capacity (TCaF) and establishment and growth (TEG) funds, we can reveal. The findings show the scale of the impact of Labour's academy growth cuts.

One MAT revealed that the loss of the funding has left it having to claw back up to £300,000 from reserves. Another said it may have to make redundancies.

And England's biggest academy chain warned that the cuts will harm the education of children in struggling schools.

"If even only a fraction of these bids had been funded by now, we would have seen dozens of schools receiving sustained, structured support from strong trusts, of the sort the government has acknowledged as the key driver of rising standards," Steve Rollett, deputy CEO of the Confederation of School Trusts, said.

Scale of trust support fund cut revealed

TCaF provided cash to help MATs develop their capacity and take on underperforming schools, particularly in left-behind parts of the country. Many trusts paid for the improvements before receiving the cash.

Meanwhile, up to £50,000 was available through TEG to establish new trusts or support growth.

The government announced in November that both schemes would be axed, with no cash being awarded to any of those who had bid for the latest round of funding.

Figures obtained through freedom of information requests show 188 TCaF applications – worth £42 million and spanning 413 schools – were lodged at the time. The funding round attracted more bids than any other.

Three requested £750,000, the maximum sum available. The average application was for £223,000.

Reserves dented

The First Federation Trust, in the South-west,



applied for almost £750,000 to absorb eight schools after being "encouraged" by the regions group.

Paul Walker, the primary-only MAT's chief executive, said he hoped to use some to restructure his "finance, back-office teams to manage" the expansion.

"We run a very lean central structure, but by not getting the TCaF we've had to expand our team to manage the new schools with very little resource to do that. [This] has been a massive challenge."

He envisages raiding up to £300,000 from his £1.4 million reserves as a result.

In Suffolk, the Consortium Trust applied for £110,000. CEO Andrew Aalders-Dunthorne said axing the fund contributed to the chain's decision to consult on "one or two" central team redundancies, having already made cuts last year.

ULT: Education 'harmed'

United Learning Trust asked for just over £1.2 million across four separate applications.

A spokesperson said the cash "would have been used for schools in the process of joining us which have exceptional need for additional support". Its ability to support them has now been dealt a "significant" blow.

With conversions also "taking longer", the education of youngsters "has undoubtedly been harmed", the spokesperson added.

More than half of trusts said growth plans had been impacted by the removal of TCaF, a survey from the Kreston accountancy firm group found. Most expect to grow more slowly.

Our analysis suggests the trusts lodging TCaF applications ran 10 schools on average.

Five of the bidders were local authority-

maintained schools that have not yet converted.

In the last TCaF round, just 40 per cent of the £30 million bid for was actually awarded.

Synergy Education Trust chief Neill Oldham intended to use £500,000 to develop a MAT-wide ICT strategy, improve central team capacity and provide "expert legal, HR, and policy support".

Having "carefully aligned our growth strategy with the funding criteria", he said his chain's "ability to provide high-quality support" in Blackpool "will be significantly hindered" with costs "pushed" onto his academies.

MAT plan shelved

Thirty-eight more applications, involving more than 250 schools and amounting to £1.8 million, were submitted to TEG.

One local authority federation applied for funding to become a MAT. It is now "taking a period of time to consider the changing educational landscape, in the light of the withdrawal, before deciding on next steps".

West Midlands-based Victoria Academies Trust was one of a handful of organisations that requested TCaF and TEG help.

CEO Sharron Philpot said that, through TEG, the MAT "planned to provide critical support to three schools in Sandwell", which was listed as a priority area by the previous government. But the "loss of this funding has resulted in the planned extra support not being realised".

However, Nigel Attwood, the head of Birmingham local authority-maintained school, said "inequalities in the system" gave academies exclusive "access to increasing amounts of money".

This was "not fair when maintained schools are struggling and falling apart".

Another LA school head, Andrew O'Neill, added: "We need government to govern the whole system and make capacity and improvement funds available to all types of schools where it's needed."

Others also pointed out that some trusts have sizeable reserves.

A DfE spokesperson said they valued the role trusts play in the system, but they "have had to take action to put government spending back on to a sustainable footing".

They will "continue to support high-quality trusts to use their collaboration and leadership to help deliver exceptional results" for pupils, the spokesperson added.

INVESTIGATION

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Give us back our money, parents tell failed payment provider

ROSA FURNEAUX

@ROSAFURNEAUX

EXCLUSIVE

Schools are demanding that a payment provider which has ceased operating in the UK should refund their parents in full amid accusations that cash is being “withheld”.

sQuid provided parents with an online account where funds could be uploaded to pay for school dinners and trips – but shut up shop last Friday. Around 600 schools used it.

However, the firm will only refund parents for balances over £10, and those wanting to withdraw their cash must pay a £10 “administration fee”.

Rob Pointen, CEO of Weduc which had partnered with sQuid, said the decision to deny parents refunds appeared “wholly unjustifiable” in an email he sent to the firm.

“Parents deposited their money in good faith, and it is wholly unacceptable for them to be penalised simply because your company is shutting down,” he wrote in a letter to sQuid’s CEO last Friday.

‘It’s just very wrong’

While parents tend to keep small amounts on sQuid accounts, schools said it can add up. One trust claimed sQuid currently holds about £43,000 deposited by parents at its schools. Others said the firm was holding between £5,000 and £8,000.

“That money means a lot to some of our parents,” Harj Oghra, CFO at Dormers Wells Learning Trust, which serves a deprived area of London, said.

“Three or four pounds for a family that’s struggling to pay rent or pay bills ... That buys a lot for their child at breaktime,” she said. “It is just very wrong.”

Anne Marie Bray, business manager at Clive CoE Primary School in Shropshire, said: “When families are struggling, it’s even more vital, but actually they have an obligation to refund everybody.”

“Otherwise, they’re making a massive profit from something that was beyond our control.”

Schools said they were also frustrated that sQuid had left them with just five weeks to find a new provider, with some still in the process of transferring, according to Pointen.



“If [sQuid] had given us three months, we could have avoided any of the anxiety for schools and parents,” he added.

Adam Smith, sQuid’s CEO, said it had closed UK operations “because of increasingly adverse trading conditions during and post-Covid which have made the business unsustainable”.

He said the company “has been carrying out an orderly exit, leaving time for schools to find alternative providers while continuing to support services for schools and parents.”

He added: “The company has continued to provide a refund service. We are doing so in accordance with our terms and conditions. We understand if some schools are upset that we are making charges.”

Moving the goalposts

The issue has been compounded as parents were told they could claim full refunds on their remaining balances before April 14. But schools say the firm enforced the £10 admin fee from as early as mid-March.

“How can you charge an admin fee when you’re the one shutting down?” Oghra added. “We are helpless because it’s not our money.”

Smith said there had been an “element of miscommunication” in the company’s statement about the April 14 deadline. While sQuid had initially waived charges, it was now “in a situation where we’re no longer able to do that”.

He encouraged parents in deprived areas to contact sQuid to “review” their refunds.

But schools have also complained about

the time taken for their emails and calls to be answered since the firm shut.

Smith said he was “very, very surprised” to hear that schools had had difficulty communicating. The company had “worked very hard” to maintain its customer service.

Nathan Jeremiah, COO at Archway Learning Trust, said the firm took eight days to comply with the school’s request to completely disable the “auto top-off” function. Smith disputed this and said the function was turned off after four days.

But Jeremiah added some of his parents requesting refunds on balances above £100 had encountered issues, and was also critical of the firm removing the function allowing refund requests through their app. Instead, parents must log into their accounts on the firm’s website.

Across the trust, Jeremiah said sQuid currently holds credit balances totalling more than £40,000.

Smith said the large balance was “not the result of [sQuid’s] failure” and money was being returned “in accordance with the terms and conditions”.

“I am therefore not quite sure as to what the issue actually is,” he added.

He said many schools had planned alternative arrangements “without any issues at all”.

But Dave Watts, school administrator at Clive CoE Primary School, said: “It’s not something schools would choose to do halfway through the year. We’ve had to move very, very quickly. It’s been quite a stressful time.”

NEWS

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Priority education areas no longer a priority

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

A Conservative levelling-up scheme designed to boost outcomes in education priority areas is set to end, leaving councils drawing up their own plans to informally continue the work.

In 2022, the then government announced the education investment area (EIA) programme – which prioritised 55 towns and counties with the lowest results for several grants.

As part of that, 24 were later classified as priority education investment areas (PEIAs), places with high levels of deprivation as well as low achievement.

They were allocated a share of the £42 million local needs fund, used to pay for bespoke interventions to improve attainment in the PEIAs through to the end of March 2025.

At the time, the schools white paper said this would aim to address “entrenched underperformance, including in literacy and numeracy”. But the funding for the priority areas will not be extended after the end of this month.

Challenge Partners CEO Dr Kate Chhatwal chaired Liverpool's PEIA board, which consisted



of local heads, council officers, the Department for Education (DfE) and the Education Endowment Foundation. It used its £3.7 million share of the local needs fund to commission programmes to boost attendance and early years speech and language communication.

Chhatwal said a local organisation is now working with the council to see how the different initiatives might be continued.

Meanwhile in Sandwell in the West Midlands, council papers published ahead of a meeting in January show the area was allocated £2.9 million through the local needs fund to improve maths “in targeted schools”, along with primary and secondary English attainment.

The authority “will need to consider how development to date could be sustained and how

this could continue to be funded and delivered” now that funding is ending.

It was suggested that the council's school improvement team could “lead on future development, building on that established via the PEIA programme... potentially in collaboration with other local partners”.

But minutes show “the results from schools [have] not been validated yet”, which meant the impact of the PEIA “funding and programme had not been fully calculated”.

Priority schools also had access to the attendance mentoring pilot, which will continue for another three years although it only covers 10 areas. They are also still part of the wider education investment areas, but the government has remained tight-lipped about their future.

Two schemes benefiting these schools – Connect the Classroom and levelling-up retention payments – are continuing, however. A DfE spokesperson highlighted free breakfast clubs and increasing pupil premium funding.

The government's new school improvement (RISE) teams “will take this further... tackling the biggest challenges as we break down barriers to opportunity”, they added.



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NEWS

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National centre for arts and music pledged

FREDDIE WHITTAKER
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The government will set up a new “national centre for arts and music education” and a task and finish group to advise on how to equip pupils for an “AI and digital world”.

A new framework will also set out “what a high-quality enrichment offer looks like” and may in future include “standardised benchmarks and tools” to help schools.

The Department for Education said the new arts education centre would signpost pupils to “industry-backed careers guidance” and opportunities to pursue creative interests in school, including through the existing network of music hubs.

It will also provide new continuing professional development online for teachers and “bolster collaboration” between schools and arts organisations.

The centre is “expected to be established in September 2026, with a delivery lead appointed through an open procurement”.

Previous Conservative governments established many networks of hubs – schools that receive funding to share best practice with other schools in their area. But several of the schemes have been scrapped or scaled back by the Labour administration.

Schools Week revealed in January that funding for computing hubs has been scrapped and similar support for languages was being scaled



back. We also revealed that the £10 million behaviour hubs scheme will end in its current form this month.

The government said at the time it was considering rolling support for behaviour into its regional improvement for standards and excellence (RISE) teams.

Panel to advise on ‘jobs for the future’

The DfE will also set up a new “digital, AI and technology task and finish group”. It will be “made up of sector and digital experts” and will “advise the government on what changes can be made to prepare children and young people for the jobs of the future”.

It will be tasked with helping the government to ensure that children are “equipped to thrive in an AI and digital world, creating strong foundations for access to more specialist AI and digital pathways and making the most of

the opportunities to use AI and educational technology to drive better teaching and learning”.

It added: “We intend that this work will commence shortly and conclude before the end of the academic year”.

When asked who would be appointed to the group, the DfE said this would be revealed “in due course”.

New ‘enrichment framework’ planned

An enrichment framework will also be developed “alongside a working group consisting of experts from schools, youth, sports and arts organisations and research bodies”.

Again, the DfE said these experts would be named “in due course”. The framework will be published “by the end of the year”.

It will “identify and reflect” practice in the best schools to “set out what a high-quality enrichment offer looks like”.

The DfE will also “consider with the sector whether standardised benchmarks and tools can form a useful part of that support”.

Michele Gregson, general secretary of the National Society for Education in Art and Design, said the new centre was “good news for the sector”.

“However, it is not a replacement for investment in our schools and will do nothing to stem the flow of experienced teachers from the workforce, or attract new entrants to the profession.

“Our schools are in crisis and we need action now.”

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

Schools could be held to account on digital standards

The government is considering holding schools to account for meeting six “core digital standards”, warning that only 16 per cent meet them currently.

The Department for Education launched 11 digital standards for schools and colleges in 2022. It is now consulting on six of them – broadband internet, wireless networks, network switches, digital leadership, filtering and monitoring, and cyber security.

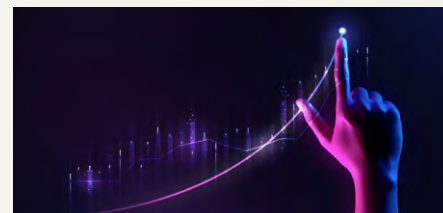
The DfE said its “long-term ambition” was for “all schools and colleges to meet six core

digital standards by 2030”.

It is not clear whether the standards will change or are simply a subset of the same 11 standards previously produced.

Asked if following the standards would be mandatory for schools, the DfE said: “We will explore long-term options for greater accountability on these standards for 2030.”

The DfE has also announced a £45 million extension to programmes that upgrade wifi networks in schools and bring them fibre broadband.



Of this funding, £25 million is an extension of the Connect the Classroom scheme – which was due to end this year. Meanwhile, £20 million more will be pumped into the government’s fibre rollout programme.

EXPLAINER: CURRICULUM

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Key findings from interim curriculum review

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

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The government's curriculum review will examine the volume of content taught in primary school and whether the EBacc is achieving its purpose. It will also consider reducing the number of exams at key stage 4.

But it has ruled out "fundamental" changes to the number of GCSE qualifications that pupils sit and proposes keeping "strong" A-levels.

Primary tests are also here to stay, although the review will look at improvements to writing and spelling, punctuation and grammar tests.

The review's interim report sets out four key areas on which it will focus – a system that works for all, curriculum shape and content, a curriculum "fit for the future" and 16 to 19 pathways and qualifications.

The call for evidence alone has had 7,000 responses. Here's your trusty Schools Week key findings...

REFORM AREA 1: A SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR ALL

1. The system isn't working well for everyone...

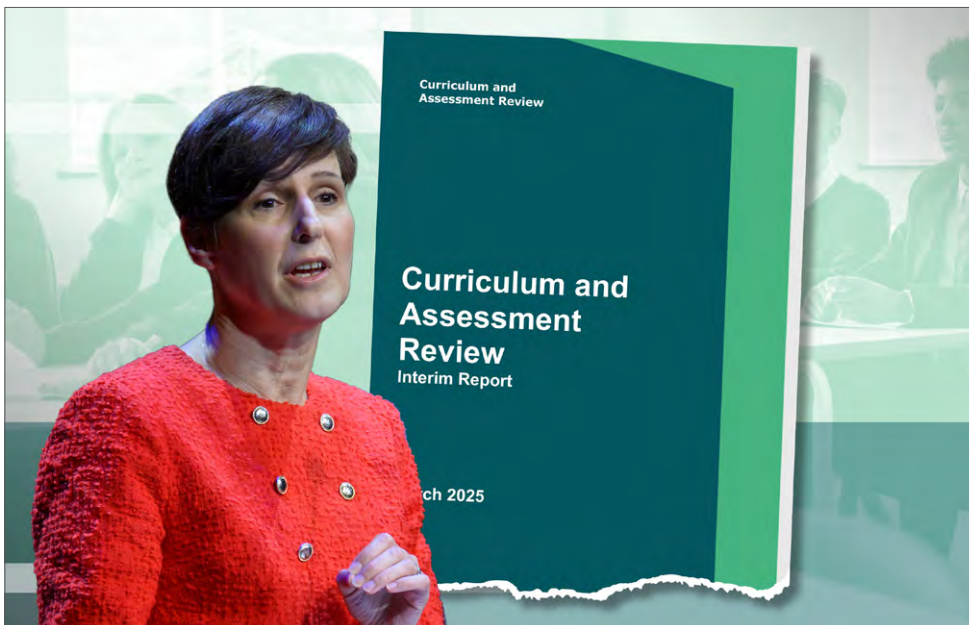
The report makes clear that the curriculum is, broadly, a good one that is backed by most parents.

It is "a knowledge-rich offer, and international comparisons suggest that the present arrangements have had a positive impact on attainment", the report states.

This "reflects a continued commitment to high and rising standards" in schools over the past 25 years, however excellence "is not yet provided for all; persistent attainment gaps remain".

The review will "consider the positive impact we can make on the outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged young people and those with SEND, with the levers that are at our disposal, while remaining aware of the wider challenges the sector faces".

As well as making sure the curriculum and assessment system "prepares young people for life and work, the review applies a social justice lens throughout its work".



REFORM AREA 2: CURRICULUM SHAPE AND CONTENT

2. Curriculum breadth welcomed, but delivery 'challenging'

The report says the most frequent theme in response to its call for evidence was "positivity about the breadth of the curriculum" across all key stages.

However, many respondents "cited the trade-off between breadth and depth, noting that while the curriculum has a large variety of subjects, there can be a challenge to address them all adequately".

Arts advocates also say their subjects have been squeezed out.

3. Review into volume of content in primary school lessons

The review heard that the key stage 1 and 2 curriculum "is not effectively balancing depth and breadth" – leading to a "struggle to cover all content with sufficient depth and negatively affects pupils' ability to master foundational concepts".

In its next phase, the review will look at the "volume of specified content at key stages 1 and 2 to ensure that a good level of breadth across the curriculum is achievable, while continuing to drive high and rising standards in all subjects".

4. Breadth 'compromised' at key stage 3

The curriculum is broadest in terms of subjects studied at key stage 3, but that is "often being compromised".

The volume of content to be covered at key stage 4 means "many schools begin preparing pupils for GCSE in year 9...which narrows the curriculum offer and may curtail learning in curriculum subjects not selected for further study".

The review also heard that transitions "are not always well-aligned, particularly between key stage 2 and key stage 3". Also repetition at key stage 3 "can cause learners to become disengaged".

The review will look at the "alignment" between key stages, "assessing how breadth and sequencing can better support students to build their knowledge and deepen their understanding".

5. EBacc under review

The two "main" barriers to achieving breadth and balance are at key stage 4.

The first is the volume of content, which "challenges depth" and squeezes time for mandatory but non-assessed subjects such as PE and RE.

The second is the EBacc performance measure which, respondents said, "may unnecessarily constrain student choice (and, consequently,

Continued on next page

EXPLAINER: CURRICULUM

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their engagement and/or achievement)".

While the review is "strongly committed" to progress performance measures, it will "review the impact of performance measures on curriculum breadth, depth, and choice for all pupil groups".

While the EBacc's intention to improve access to an academic curriculum was acknowledged, the review will "also consider whether this remains the most effective means of achieving this objective".

REFORM AREA 3: CURRICULUM
FIT FOR THE FUTURE**6. 'Knowledge-rich' commitment, but curriculum must 'keep pace'**

Respondents broadly supported a "high-quality, knowledge-rich curriculum", but the "rapid social, environmental and technological change necessitates that the curriculum keep pace", the review said.

This includes a "renewed focus" on digital and media literacy, and a "greater focus on sustainability and climate science".

Polling suggests young people also want "the applied knowledge and skills that will equip them for later life and work".

The review will "consider whether there is sufficient coverage of these (and other) areas of knowledge and skills within subjects, and how content can remain relevant and support young people to thrive in a fast-changing world."

7. Subject-by-subject review over content balance 'inhibiting mastery'

The "current construction and balance of content appears to be inhibiting" mastery in some subjects, the review heard.

The causes "are not always clear". While "questions have been raised about the volume of content, we have also been made aware of challenges with under-prescription in subjects, with some programmes of study lacking specificity".

The next review phase "will conduct closer analysis to diagnose each subject's specific problems and explore and test a range of solutions".

8. Review to identify opportunities to 'increase diversity'

The review "heard compelling arguments that the curriculum needs to do more in ensuring that all young people feel represented, and that

it successfully delivers the equalities duties to support equality of opportunity and challenge discrimination".

But, as well as making sure that children and young people can see themselves represented in the curriculum, "it will be important that we also make sure they encounter the unfamiliar, and have their horizons stretched and broadened".

The review will "look across the curriculum to examine where opportunities exist to increase diversity in representation, and to ensure that the curriculum facilitates a fostering of inclusivity and challenge to discrimination".

REFORM AREA 4: 16-19
PATHWAYS AND QUALIFICATIONS**9. A-levels here to stay, concerns over vocational**

The report found that A-levels are "working well" and T-levels are "becoming an established brand". But "too many young people are not gaining the right knowledge and skills as they progress through the system".

Students and employers were "unclear" about the purpose and value of some of the large number of technical and vocational qualifications, which serve 40 per cent of young people.

This can lead to "churn in the system, with learners switching between courses and, as a result, poor outcomes for them and for the economy".

10. English and maths re-sit changes signalled

Pupils who do not get a grade 4 in English, maths or both at GCSE must continue to study the subjects during post-16. This is a condition of funding for sixth forms and other providers.

The review heard that this must "continue to be the ambition" and will remain, but there is "clear evidence" the funding policy is "not yet fully delivering its intended purpose".

The review will look at "greater nuance in measures to ensure that as many learners as possible can achieve positive outcomes".

11. SATs 'important tool', but review to look at SPAG and writing

The review largely backed primary assessment, saying: "We are clear that formal assessments are an important part of key stage 1 and 2."

However, it heard concerns that the

standalone end of key stage 2 assessment on grammar, punctuation and spelling "might lead to the teaching of textual features in isolation at the expense of a sound understanding of reading and writing".

The review will review how this assessment "might better equip pupils to use these foundational building blocks fluently."

There were also concerns that the key stage 2 writing assessment "does not validly assess pupils' ability to write fluently and does not incentivise effective teaching of writing". The review will examine how this "can be improved to support high and rising standards".

12. No 'fundamental' GCSE changes...

The review said it would approach assessment reform "in an evolutionary rather than revolutionary way."

Traditional examined assessment will largely remain and the number of GCSE subjects studied will not "fundamentally change". But the impact of exams on pupil wellbeing was "frequently raised".

13. ...but volume of exams under spotlight

Another concern was the "volume of assessment" at key stage 4.

Students in England "typically sit between 24 and 31 hours of exams in year 11". This is comparable to Singapore but "significantly more than other high-performing jurisdictions".

Previous reforms reduced the use of coursework and other non-exam assessment.

The review will now "consider carefully whether there are opportunities to reduce the overall volume of assessment at key stage 4 without compromising the reliability of results".

It will take a "subject-by-subject approach to consider assessment fitness for purpose and consider the impact of different assessment methods on teaching and learning".





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Ofsted mulls asking schools to rate inspectors

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

Ofsted is considering quizzing schools on inspectors' "empathy, courtesy and respect" and the organisation's wider culture after inspections, Schools Week can reveal.

A report from the watchdog this week noted that it has "begun internal work to explore commissioning an independent survey to ask professionals across all the sectors we work with for their views on Ofsted's culture".

It added: "This will include our openness, our organisational integrity, and whether inspectors and all of our staff are demonstrating our values of professionalism, empathy, courtesy and respect."

"We are also exploring asking post-inspection survey questions as part of the same survey."

Ofsted's board would then "scrutinise the data... to help us constantly refine and improve our performance".

'Improving how we work with schools'

Currently, post-inspection surveys only ask school staff for views on whether the inspection was carried out in a "professional manner".

An Ofsted spokesperson stressed it has "made several changes to inspection over the last year, focused on school leaders' and staff welfare".

"But we are always looking to improve the way we work with schools," they added.

"That is why we're currently consulting on changes to inspection that aim to take these reforms even further."

However, the news has reignited debate over



inspector conduct, amid warnings there are still "too many" leaders being pushed to the brink of leaving the profession following onerous visits.

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the National Association of Headteachers, said: "In the last month alone, we have heard from school leaders who are considering leaving the profession as a result of a bad inspection experience."

"Even leaders who receive good outcomes describe being broken by the experience."

'It's insane'

Headteacher Stuart Mycroft was stressed, anxious and "sobbing uncontrollably" when Ofsted called on Castleway Primary School in November.

The visit came just two months after an inspection at Castleway Nursery School, which he also leads. Both were rated 'good' in all areas.

Despite this, Mycroft said there "was a stark contrast" between the visits, even though they were conducted "under the same framework, leadership team and in the same community and building". The "only" difference was the inspection team.

"You are rolling the dice... [as] the fate of your school depends on the mood of the person who walks into your building – it's insane."

Whiteman added that, "while not all inspections are like this, too many are and there is clearly a very long way to go. Rigour does not require high stakes, cliff edges or a confrontational approach."

A Teacher Tapp survey in December found just 35 per cent of teachers said it was possible to accurately assess a school's performance in just three days.

To conduct an accurate assessment, the majority of teachers said inspectors needed knowledge of the school's context (85 per cent), phase expertise (80 per cent) and subject expertise (60 per cent).

Post-inspection surveys

In September, headline Ofsted grades were ditched, ahead of a planned move to report cards in the next academic year. This came after the death of headteacher Ruth Perry.

A coroner ruled that an inspection contributed to her suicide after she was told her school had been rated 'inadequate'. Ofsted subsequently promised to track whether "perceptions" of it were "improving over time".

It has also now commissioned "independent behavioural research and cognitive testing" to determine how it can "best hear from children, learners, parents, carers and provider staff during" visits.

To aid this, it has "engaged with other international inspectorates to review best practice".

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | @LYDIACHSW

Experienced inspector should not have been sacked, appeal court rules

A senior Ofsted inspector was unfairly dismissed after brushing rainwater from a boy's head, the Court of Appeal has ruled.

Andrew Hewston, an inspector of 12 years with an "unblemished" record, was dismissed by the inspectorate for gross misconduct in 2019.

The headteacher of a school had sent an 11-page letter to Ofsted, mentioning the incident among other complaints about an inspection. Ofsted began disciplinary proceedings against Hewston before sacking him.

A 2023 employment appeal tribunal ruled this was unfair dismissal. Ofsted tried to

overturn this decision, but its appeal was rejected by Court of Appeal last autumn. A unanimous judgment handed down by the court on Friday upheld the ruling that Hewston was unfairly dismissed.

Christina McAnea, general secretary of the Unison union, criticised the watchdog for pursuing the case.

"Andrew Hewston's career was cruelly and unnecessarily cut short by Ofsted," she said.

"He never should have been sacked and Ofsted shouldn't have wasted public money pursuing him

needlessly through the courts."

The judges said it was "deeply regrettable" that the "experienced inspector with an unblemished record" had been sacked. They said Hewston's conduct "amounted to no more than a momentary and well-meaning lapse of professional judgment of a kind which he was most unlikely ever to repeat".

Hewston described the past five-and-a-half years as "very difficult", adding: "But I am glad my name has been cleared, and my exemplary record remains intact."

Ofsted declined to comment.



Christina McAnea

IN PARLIAMENT: SCHOOLS BILL

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Schools bill proceeds despite chorus of criticism

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

Attempts to amend the government's schools bill to ban mobile phones and enact free school meals auto-enrolment failed this week as Labour doubled down in the face of increasing opposition.

A former Ofsted chief inspector added her voice to a chorus of criticism over Labour's handling of the children's wellbeing and schools bill, while a former government adviser accused the administration of not being "prepared" for government.

The schools bill seeks to make academies follow the national curriculum, require their teachers to have or work towards qualified status and observe minimum pay rates.

It also grants the government sweeping new powers over academies, and councils a bigger role in admissions.

During its report stage and third reading this week, ministers again clashed with opposition MPs over their plans. Neil O'Brien, the shadow education minister, said the bill was "misguided, destructive and, ultimately, very depressing".

O'Brien added that schools had been improved "by the magic formula of freedom plus accountability.

"The bill attacks both parts of that formula. On the one hand, it strips academy schools of freedoms over recruitment and curriculum and reimposes incredible levels of micromanagement.

"On the other hand, it strikes at accountability and parental choice, ending the automatic transfer of failing schools to new management and reversing the reforms of the late 1980s, which allowed good schools to expand without permission from their local authority – a reform that ushered in parental choice."

But education secretary Bridget Phillipson accused the Conservatives of "scaremongering".

She called on opposition MPs to "put aside their rhetoric and gimmickry, just for one moment, and consider what their constituents actually want – not their friends in high places, in the commentariat and in the Westminster bubble, but parents up and down this country.

"Parents want qualified teachers at the front of their children's classrooms. Parents want to know for sure what their child is being taught.



Parents want more teachers in our schools, better trained and supported."

But shadow ministers are not the only critics of the bill. Amanda Spielman, who ran Ofsted from 2017 to 2024, accused the government of putting the wishes of unions ahead of children.

She said the schools bill proposals, alongside other initiatives such as the curriculum review, "seem to add up to a very significant reversal, without any analysis of what's been good and what's been less good".

Sam Freedman, an adviser to former education secretary Michael Gove, told the ASCL leaders' union conference at the weekend that Labour "wasn't prepared. And there still isn't an overarching narrative".

He said he was "genuinely really confused" by the government's decision not to publish a white paper or similar vision document ahead of the bill's introduction.

"I have never seen an important bill in any policy area just be published with no narrative, no speech, no anything, barely a press release just before Christmas," he said.

"And inevitably, as a result, it means people who are opposed to you will put their own implications on the bill... And it also means that the people you need to do the actions in the bill don't understand why you're asking them to do that."

Phillipson was also criticised by some leaders for responding to the criticism by saying that opposition ministers and their "friends in the commentariat should try leaving London for a

change: they'll find plenty of underperforming academies which need new answers to drive up standards in their classrooms".

Despite the concerns, the bill easily passed its third reading in the House of Commons this week, with Labour MPs voting only for the government's own amendments.

An attempt by the Conservatives to force all schools to ban mobile phones during the school day failed, as ministers insisted that teachers and headteachers "already have the means" to make sure their classes are phone-free.

The Conservatives also ducked introducing a ban while in government, instead issuing guidance for schools.

The government also voted down an attempt by the Liberal Democrats to enact auto-enrolment for free school meals for all eligible children. Pilot schemes by councils have seen thousands more children benefit, and schools get more cash via the pupil premium.

The party also tried to extend plans to limit profits that can be made by private social care providers to cover independent special schools, but Labour voted it down.

The bill will now head to the House of Lords, where ministers will be gearing up for a bruising fight, potentially with some of their own peers.

The government lacks a majority in the upper house, and its membership includes some ardent defenders of the academies programme who were instrumental in killing off the last attempts at reform by the Johnson government in 2022.

NEWS: SCHOOLS BILL

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Council attempt to cut academies' intake 'absurd', says MAT boss

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

A trust has snubbed council plans to slash its admission numbers – but fears Labour reforms will give authorities hit by falling rolls more teeth to squeeze academy intakes in future.

Norfolk County Council wanted the Inspiration Trust to reduce places by up to a half across four of its schools, all of which are rated 'good' or 'outstanding'.

While the MAT once run by children's commissioner Rachel De Souza was able to rebuff the proposals, CEO Gareth Stevens believes the schools bill could force leaders into accepting such "absurd" strategies.

"My overarching concern is that the proposed bill would enable [similar] poorly judged decisions by local authorities to drive down educational standards by limiting the capacity of exceptional schools in an effort to sustain underperforming institutions," he said.

'Handing power to politicians'

Councils have statutory responsibilities relating to planning school places in their area. While councils can determine reductions in local authority-maintained schools, their powers do not extend to academies.

But the schools bill – which returned to the House of Commons this week for further debate – proposes a new duty for all schools and councils to co-operate on admissions, including over place planning. The education secretary "will be able to intervene" if relations break down.

It will also hand the schools adjudicator powers to set school intake numbers, including for academies, where an objection to a school's arrangements is upheld.

This will give councils – which are able to lodge complaints to the adjudicator – "greater influence" to assist with their place-planning duties.

Speaking in the House of Commons this week, Conservative shadow schools minister Neil O'Brien said "schools will shut or shrink, whatever the rules are" where there are falling rolls.

"But, under parental choice, the places that shrink will be determined by parents voting with their feet. In contrast, under this schools bill, it will depend on the ideological and political views of local councillors. This bill is moving power from parents to politicians."



Gareth Stevens

Norfolk proposed to halve the 2026-27 intake of two Inspiration schools, Charles Darwin Primary and Stradbroke Primary, while entry numbers at the other two would have been reduced by up to a quarter. All four are rated 'good' or 'outstanding'.

'Absurd, nonsensical strategy'

Stevens said he knocked back the proposals, but fears that, if the schools bill is voted through, the council's "absurd strategy would force us to reduce the number of places available in some of Norfolk's highest-performing schools".

The intake numbers "are neither financially nor operationally viable", he said, adding that Stradbroke would have had to merge classes to remain sustainable.

Meanwhile, Charles Darwin Primary has a "substantial waiting list", with attainment results "15 per cent above the national average".

"Given that Norfolk as a whole ranks 141st out of 143 local authorities at key stage 2, it is entirely nonsensical to halve the number of available places at this 'outstanding' school."

However, the council stressed it has put forward similar proposals to cut intakes at 'good' and 'outstanding' maintained schools.

Penny Carpenter, the council's cabinet member for children's services, said they "consulted with all types of schools as we do each year, and proposed some reductions... in areas with overall falling rolls".

This was "the only criteria we used in making suggested" intake cuts. This is because "schools can become financially unviable quite quickly if

their admission number is much higher than their overall" roll.

"There is also a risk that more popular schools draw large numbers of pupils away from their local catchment school, which then can leave those other schools in the area without enough pupils, forcing them to close," Carpenter added.

More tensions amid falling rolls

Sheffield Hallam University professor of education Mark Boylan believes the current policy has created "a two-tier system", with authorities unable to carry out their place-planning responsibilities because "trusts have such autonomy".

He described the idea of councils coming after academies as "misleading", adding that their decisions were based on "meeting the needs of local people".

"You can have situations [now] where successful schools are closing and academies that are much less successful and popular with parents staying open. It doesn't make any sense at all," he said.

Education Policy Institute analysis suggests a 4.5 per cent fall in primary pupil numbers nationally between 2022-23 and 2027-28. London is predicted to face the biggest drop of 7.8 per cent.

Councils have long asked for greater powers to manage places in academies. London Councils, a cross-party organisation representing the capital's boroughs, urged the government to give councils the power to cut academy intakes, if there "is clear evidence of a significant drop in demand and a need to act to ensure a school remains viable".

FEATURE: INCLUSION

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Lost learning solutions: meet the inclusion trailblazers

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

"A crisis of lost learning is sweeping across schools in England," a report by the education charity The Difference said this week.

Children lost a total of 11.5 million days' worth of learning in the autumn term of 2023 – a huge rise from pre-Covid – as suspensions, exclusions and home education soar.

Children not in school are more likely to be those in poverty, with special education needs or in social care.

To "turn the tide", the report said that schools must become more inclusive, and children must be made to feel they belong there. But how?

Schools Week spoke to the schools leading on the four key inclusion principles outlined by the report ...

Principle 1: Inclusion built from the universal up

At Heritage High School, a secondary in Chesterfield, suspensions have halved and persistent absence has fallen by 4 per cent after the school introduced "universal inclusion" policies.

Changes such as free breakfasts and "community lunches" which ensure that no child eats alone mean youngsters "feel really positive about coming in", said headteacher Deb Elsdon.

After noticing a peak in absences on Fridays, the school now offers incentive-led treats and rewards at the end of the week. A "culture of appreciation" between staff and pupils encourages praise for positive actions.

"What we're trying to do is really [ensure] that sense of belonging," said Wes Davies, CEO of The Two Counties Trust, which runs the school. "That genuine inclusion – that 'I belong in any classroom, on any corridor in any assembly'."

This extends to excluded pupils.

Heritage High's intervention centre is led by senior leaders



Wes Davies



'What we're trying to do is really [ensure] that sense of belonging'

and subject specialists "to give a very clear message that our priority children have the most senior staff", Elsdon added.

Xavier Catholic Education Trust, a MAT with 19 schools in Surrey, has turned classrooms into "low sensory environments" to make it easier for all children, not just those with SEND, to learn.

SEND lead Charlie Allison said: "We have nothing on the windows, nothing hanging from the ceilings... we have clear desks so that, actually, every single child can learn better in that environment. The teachers give the children a huge part of the room."

The Difference's report urges the government to boost whole-school inclusion across the country by providing £850m over the next five years, which could pay for itself.

Analysis suggested the funding would mean quicker support for 100,000 children per year, reducing the need for 35,000 education, health and care plans (EHCPs).

Currently most support is often funnelled into specialist interventions, while funding for "universal, preventative" support has fallen.

Principle 2: Inclusive culture led from the top

All school staff should "see inclusion as central to what they do and the everyday interactions they have with children", The Difference said.

Davies has invested in sending leaders across his trust on courses to help boost their understanding of inclusion, helping them to build a "shared vision" of how to solve it.

"If I'm saying as a CEO, 'every school is going to have a senior leader who has done [inclusion training], that really signals what is important to me, to the organisation, to children,'" Davies said.

Principle 3. Inclusion is community collaboration

The report said that schools should "know their students', families', staff and wider communities' strengths".

Headteachers' standards specify leaders should forge constructive relationships beyond

Continued on next page

FEATURE: INCLUSION

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the school. But Teacher Tapp polling has found that more than half of teachers had never received training on parent communication.

The report urged the government to add skills around working with families and local communities into its suite of professional qualifications.

Xavier Catholic Education Trust has an “every day is an open day” policy, meaning that visitors are always welcome. Outreach also includes parental workshops on sleeping patterns, healthy living and stress management.

“We want to be a lighthouse,” said director of inclusion Zelia Munnik. “We want to open our doors, and we want to be able to change cycles. And the only way in which we are going [to do that is to] get the children in school.

“We had to reach out to the families... those hard-to-reach parents... It’s leaving no stone unturned and being relentless in terms of our positivity... in order to build relationships with our families.”

The report also said the government should publish a plan to “radically improve” access to children’s mental health and speech and language support.

Forty thousand children are waiting over two years for mental health support, according to 2024 NHS England figures, while 6,000 children are waiting longer than a year for speech and language therapy.

Early intervention services have been slashed by half since 2010 and the number of school nurses has dropped by a third since 2009.

Gerry Robinson is executive headteacher at Haringey Learning Partnership, a local authority-run pupil referral unit (PRU) in north London. The school is bucking national trends.

Nationally, 4 per cent of children attending alternative provision (AP) achieve a pass in GCSE English and maths. At HLP, it is 40 per cent.

It is also successful at reintegrating children into local secondary schools.

Robinson attributes much of this success to a suite of specialist support on offer. The school has a team of targeted support staff, including a mentor, counsellor, social worker, educational psychologist and speech and language therapist.

However, part of this is due to extra funding from the DfE’s AP specialist taskforce.

“Through that resource... we’re

‘We want to open our doors, and we want to be able to change cycles’

able to do speech and language screenings, we’re able for the children to see EPs (education psychologists) really quickly, to access mental health support really quickly,” Robinson told Schools Week.

“Those routes into services mean that we can identify what the needs are, and then put a support package in place... [ensuring] progress on to the next steps, which for many of our children is reintegration to mainstream.”

Principle 4. Inclusion is measurable

The report defined whole-school inclusion as “all staff supporting the learning, wellbeing and safety needs of all children, so that they belong, achieve and thrive”.

Inclusion can be measured by “understanding the wellbeing, safety and belonging of children” and by the amount of “lost learning” (which also includes managed moves, internal isolation and truancy).

The Education Alliance Multi-academy Trust (TEAL) surveys pupils on how they feel about various aspects of student life to understand their feelings about safety, belonging and wellbeing.

Jonny Uttley, the trust’s CEO, said: “Where a pupil’s attendance starts to drop... where their behaviour deteriorates, often the engagement score will have dropped first.”

Uttley believes the approach allows schools “to see every child on a really individual level” and “is potentially transformational for schools across the country”.

Similar work is underway at The Two Counties Trust, which has begun piloting a new system in which it emails pupils, parents and staff questions every half-term, to garner feedback on how included they feel.

Elsewhere, The Ted Wragg Trust has developed a centralised dashboard, bringing

together live data from the trusts’ 17 academies. Data on exclusions and lost learning is shared with school leaders weekly.

The dashboards show headline measures like suspension and persistent absence at trust level. At school level, they show the outcomes which “feed” these, such as absence and lesson removal, and give breakdowns for specific cohorts including pupils with SEND.

The data is helping leaders to “proactively identify patterns and develop the strategy for the term ahead” and measure impacts of interventions.

“When we understand our communities better, we can help foster a true sense of belonging – one that inspires more children to engage with their education, feel connected to their school, and thrive within it,” said trust director of performance Jon Lunn.

The Difference’s report said most schools, trusts and the government currently collect only “limited and patchy” data on inclusion, and are often “flying blind”.

While exclusion data is collected, practices such as off-site direction, managed moves or internal inclusion are “less visible”.

For every excluded pupil, 10 more are “moved around the school system” under these practices, the report added. It said schools should improve data collection in these areas, and Ofsted should inspect it.

Researchers said the DfE should introduce legislation that provides oversight of pupil movements off-site and off-roll.

The DfE’s regional teams should also examine schools’ intakes, identify those that are least representative of their local community and ban them from growing.

The report did not provide a methodology on how to identify such schools, but pointed to the Education Policy Institute’s benchmarking tool.

It also said school performance measures should be based on multi-year averages and include long-term data on child outcomes such as employment and earnings data.

Kiran Gill, CEO of The Difference, said: “Our education system is failing the children who need it most. Despite school leaders’ efforts, the system works against them.

“This is the new frontier in education... It is in everyone’s interest to find solutions to the crisis of lost learning.”



Jonny Uttley



Kiran Gil

NEWS: ATTENDANCE

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Big rise in SEND pupils missing more school than they attend

RHI STORER

@RHISTORERWRITES

The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) who miss more school than they attend has jumped by more than 15 per cent in a year.

The government has been urged to take urgent action as official data also showed a rise in severe absence among disadvantaged pupils and those attending alternative provision.

It comes as two other reports – one from the government and another from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) – laid bare the impact that absences have on pupil attainment.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson has ordered schools “not making enough progress” on boosting attendance to “catch up fast”.

1. More SEND pupils severely absent ...

Last academic year, 6.8 per cent of children with an education, health and care (EHC) plan were severely absent – meaning they missed 50 per cent or more of their lessons. This is up from 5.9 per cent in 2022-23, and more than double the pre-pandemic rate of 3.3 per cent.

The proportion of those receiving SEND support who were severely absent also rose from 3.8 to 4.4 per cent.

Severe absence also jumped for pupils eligible for free school meals (3.8 to 4.3 per cent) and for those attending alternative provision (38.3 to 39.2 per cent).

2. ... and overall absence high among vulnerable

Although overall absence fell slightly last year – from 7.4 to 7.1 per cent – absence rates for some of the most vulnerable children in the system remain stubbornly high, and for some they are rising.

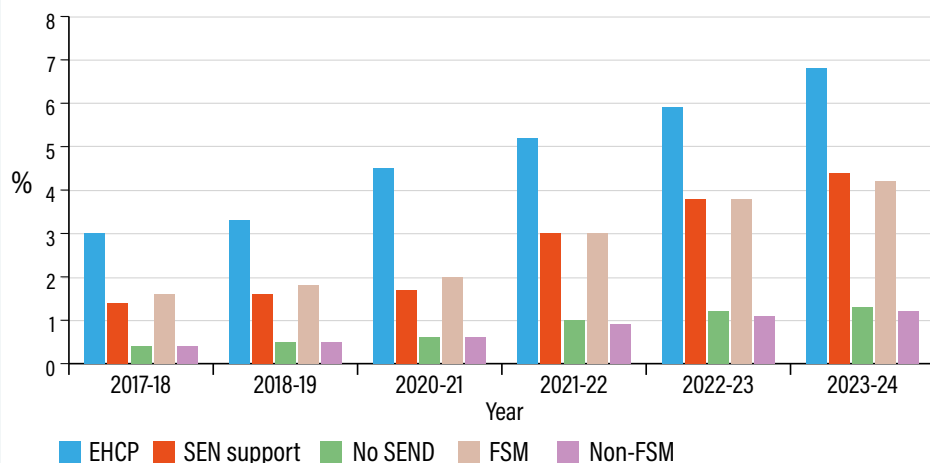
Overall absences among pupils with an EHC plan rose from 12.3 to 12.6 per cent between 2022-23 and 2023-24. Absences among those receiving SEND support was 10.2 per cent last year, the same as in 2022-23.

Absences from alternative provision also increased from 41.7 to 42.5 per cent.

3. Attainment gap rise entirely explained by absences

The EPI's report found that absences were a “key, and growing, driver of the disadvantage gap”, and that they “account for the entire increase in the

Percentage of pupils ‘severely absent’, by characteristics



Source: DfE

SCHOOLS
WEEK

gap since 2019” and may be symptomatic of other factors, such as declining mental health.

The think-tank said its report was the “first to quantify the role of pupil absence as a driver of the disadvantage gap”.

Had poorer pupils had the same level of absence as their peers in 2023, the attainment gap “would have been almost one month smaller at age 11 and over four months smaller at age 16”.

In 2023, poorer year 11 pupils were 19.2 months behind their peers, up 0.5 months since 2019.

4. Pupils further behind when starting school

Disadvantaged children were already 4.6 months behind when starting school, the EPI found. Poverty was the main reason for this inequality.

“This is not just a story of post-pandemic spikes in illness absence. It is unauthorised absence that is of key concern, particularly at secondary school,” said the report.

And almost 60 per cent of disadvantage gaps among 11-year-olds had already emerged by the time the pupils were seven, the EPI said.

5. 95%+ attendance doubles odds of a grade 5...

The DfE published a report last week which examined the link between attendance and attainment of pupils taking SATs and GCSEs.

They analysed school census data from schools and exam and test results, using a model which controlled for the effect of other factors that may affect a pupil's attainment, such as their characteristics.

The odds of pupils in year 11 achieving a grade 5 in English and maths were 1.9 times higher than those who only attended 90 to 95 per cent of the time.

Missing just 10 days of year 11 halved the odds of achieving a grade 5 in the subjects.

6. ...and boosts attainment in year 6

The research also found the odds of year 6 pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths were 1.3 times higher among those whose attendance was 95 per cent or higher than for those with 90 to 95 per cent attendance.

Missing just 10 days of year six reduced the odds of reaching the expected standard by around 25 per cent.

7. Phillipson criticises schools ‘not making progress’

The education secretary told the ASCL conference that the “evidence is clear: absence scars life chances. Every day out of the classroom will cost a child hundreds of pounds in future wages over their lifetime.”

She added that government data “shows that there are schools, facing similar challenges, but with significantly different performance on attendance.

“Some are doing really well. But others not making enough progress. Not yet learning from the best. And I won't accept the damage that does to those children.

“I expect schools to catch up – fast.”

NEWS: ATTENDANCE

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More schools get better grades since headline judgments were ditched

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS

@LYDIACHSW

More schools have been graded 'good' or 'outstanding' across the majority of Ofsted inspection areas since headline grades were ditched, new figures show.

The watchdog scrapped the use of single-phrase headline grades this academic year following the suicide of Reading headteacher Ruth Perry. Instead they get grades for the four key judgments.

Latest inspection data for September to the end of December shows the proportion of schools rated 'good' or better for quality of education remained the same as last year, at 84 per cent.

But the percentage of 'good' or better judgments across the three other areas – behaviour and attitudes, personal development, and leadership and management – all increased.

Overall, the proportion of schools judged good or outstanding by Ofsted this academic year was:

- 84% for quality of education, compared to 84% last year
- 94% for behaviour and attitudes, compared to 93% last year



- 97% for personal development, compared to 95% last year
- 89% for leadership and management, compared to 87% last year

The findings are based on 2,149 inspections that were carried out between the start of the academic year and December 31, including 1,218 that were graded.

The latest figures show primary schools achieved higher grades than secondaries for all key judgments – just as before headline grades were ditched.

Last year, the biggest difference between primary and secondary was for behaviour and attitudes, but this year the biggest difference is

for quality of education.

Ofsted said outcomes for behaviour and personal development have been more positive than other key judgments since the 2019 education inspection framework was introduced.

In the 1,218 graded inspections in same the three months last year, 62 per cent of schools received the same grade for all four judgments.

In 90 per cent of cases, schools received the same grade for both quality of education and leadership and management – making these the most likely judgments to correlate.

Just 67 per cent of schools received the same grade for both quality of education and personal development, making them the most likely to differ.

Ofsted is currently consulting on plans to overhaul its inspection framework and introduce new "report cards". It has said the reforms will "reset the bar to raise standards" in schools.

The number of schools rated 'good' or better is now at its highest level ever, but most parents do not believe this is reflective of the sector, a survey found.

LYDIA CHANTLER-HICKS | @LYDIACHSW

More pay, less pension 'could boost recruitment'

A prominent think-tank has urged the government to let schools offer less generous pensions in exchange for more upfront pay after a survey found that one in six teachers would be keen.

The Education Policy Institute (EPI) has carried out a study into whether greater flexibility over pensions and remuneration could help address the recruitment and retention crisis.

It found a "substantial minority" of teachers would prioritise an immediate pay increase over a higher pension.

The EPI is now recommending that the government should allow schools to offer alternative pension options and investigate the possibility of providing flexibility within the teachers' pension scheme (TPS) to help boost recruitment and retention.

The study comes after the country's biggest multi-academy trust, United Learning, revealed plans to allow teachers to boost their salaries in exchange for opting into a pension

scheme less generous than the TPS.

Teachers would be allowed to pay lower contributions while money saved by the MAT on employer contributions would go towards bumping up pay for those on the scheme.

Starting salaries for teachers on the scheme would rise to £45,000 in London and £38,000 elsewhere.

The move was described as "alarming" by unions, but the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) said there was a "strong case" for rebalancing public sector remuneration "away from pensions and towards pay".

EPI's new study, which surveyed nearly 6,000 teachers through Teacher Tapp on what they want from their compensation package, found 15 per cent of teachers would opt for a 10 per cent increase in their current salary, even if it meant losing 20 per cent of their retirement income.

Meanwhile almost 20 per cent of teachers in their 20s said they

would opt for the scheme.

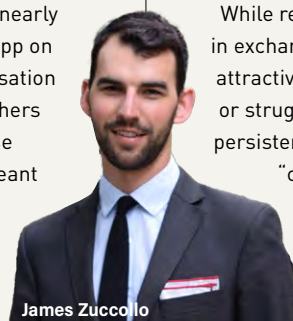
The EPI found teachers valued a 10 per cent increase in retirement income the same as a 6 per cent increase in their current salary.

James Zuccollo, director for school workforce at EPI, said: "The government needs to be open to innovations in teacher recruitment, and schemes such as United Learning's proposal should be both welcomed and carefully studied."

But the EPI said that research must be carried out before any flexible scheme is implemented.

While reducing pension contributions in exchange for a higher salary "may be attractive" when saving for a deposit or struggling to make ends meet, persistent under-saving for retirement "can have serious consequences".

United Learning did not provide an update on its pension plan.



James Zuccollo

NEWS: UNIONS

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Teacher aims to extinguish Wrack's NASUWT leadership bid

FREDDIE WHITTAKER

@FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE

A member of the NASUWT is seeking nominations to challenge Matt Wrack for the job of general secretary, insisting the teaching union “should be led by a teacher”.

Luke Akhurst, a head of history and secretary of the Leicestershire branch of the union, said he wants members to be given a “genuine choice” in an election.

Schools Week revealed earlier this month that NASUWT's executive had nominated Wrack, the former head of the Fire Brigades Union, as its preferred candidate to replace Dr Patrick Roach as general secretary.

The move came as a surprise to many, particularly given Wrack's background outside education. The union – which styles itself as “the teachers' union” because it is the only one not to admit other staff – has always been led by former educators.

Technically, any member of the union can challenge Wrack if they are nominated by at least 25 branches. In practice this is difficult, and a contested election has not happened since the early 1990s. But Akhurst intends to try.

“I was encouraged by my members to put my name forward, to get a teacher on the ballot, because obviously, the NASUWT is the teachers union,” he told Schools Week.

In his election address, obtained by Schools Week from an anonymous member, Akhurst said the union “should be led by a teacher, and as a lay-led union, it is vital to have a genuine choice.”

“I believe we need a candidate who prioritises teachers above politics and takes a pragmatic approach to deliver the best results for our members – and I am confident I can fulfil



Matt Wrack

Luke Akhurst

that role.”

Akhurst said he would use his experience in Leicestershire to “drive renewal within the NASUWT”.

He added: “Focusing on recruiting more activists, particularly getting younger members involved. Whilst updating our communications and building our media presence as the teacher's union.”

“I am passionate about representing and empowering our members, and I believe my blend of frontline teaching experience and proven union leadership makes me the right choice to lead NASUWT into the future.”

Wrack's nomination also raised eyebrows because he is more left wing – and outspoken – than the NASUWT has traditionally been.

It is usually the more moderate voice in the sector, whereas the National Education Union tends to be more critical of government.

The former FBU boss, who was unseated in an election upset in January, is also a close ally of NEU leader Daniel Kebede, raising the prospect of closer working

between the unions if he wins.

Many in the NEU's executive crave a merger with the NASUWT, but Akhurst believes the union must retain its own distinct voice and approach.

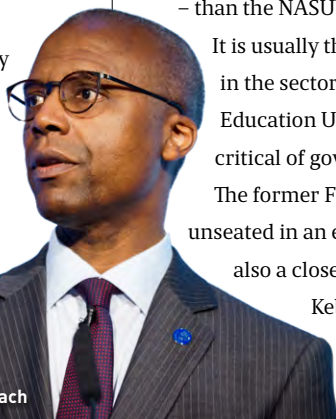
“I think for me what's really important for the NASUWT is focusing on teachers, not politics. We're guided by what members want.”

“I'm very proud to be NASUWT. The history of the union is one of standing up around teachers' issues. And I think a lot of activists, people I've spoken to, are very proud of the fact that we are a separate union.”

Akhurst said he would “definitely oppose a merger”, though he is “not against working with the NEU. I work with them on a local level”.

It is not known if any other members are seeking nominations. Anyone doing so has until April 19. If they do not get enough nominations by then, Wrack will be elected unopposed.

Dr Patrick Roach



ON LOCATION: ASCL CONFERENCE

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ASCL round-up: SEND solutions, RISE and Ofsted critics

School leaders descended on Liverpool last Friday and Saturday for the Association of School and College Leaders' annual conference. Here's four highlights ...

1. SEND solutions sought

Evidence to unearth the best school inclusion practice is being sought by ministers to help shape SEND reforms.

The Inclusion in Practice project aims to "identify and share practical, scalable solutions for inclusion in mainstream schools".

The government said examples will include schools and trusts that have added special education units, offered mainstream classes with support from specialist learning assistants, and provided specialist equipment for sports.

Approaches to early identification of need, strategies for building workforce expertise and working with families, and system-level "enablers" such as funding or leadership initiatives are also wanted.

A website has been set up as a "national resource to share examples of strong practice showcasing what works in inclusive education, helping to build capability across the sector and to better understand what good looks like".

The call for evidence closes at midnight on Thursday, May 1. Findings will be published in the summer term.

2. Inclusion tsar: 'I'd like to retire SEND label'

The term SEND should be "retired", the government's inclusion tsar announced as he spoke of problems with the current "medicalised model" for special educational needs and disabilities.



Tom Rees, Ormiston Academies Trust CEO and chair of the Department for Education's expert advisory group for inclusion, highlighted issues with categorising pupils under the "umbrella term".

He told journalists he would "like to see a world where you can retire the label of SEND, because we've become much more precise in our understanding of different needs, and this sort of generic label that we use at the moment would be redundant".

He said it could be an aim for a decade, and one that would need a "more expert school system that had less reliance on that label".

The education system must move away "from thinking about SEND as something separate" and instead make it something that is focused on and embedded into the entire education system, with good provision built into "the core of mainstream schools", Rees added.



3. RISE team priorities revealed

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson said the government's new school improvement squads, known as RISE teams, will spread "best practice following four national priorities".

She revealed the priorities were "attainment with a focus on English and maths", "reception-year quality", attendance and inclusion.

"We will drive progress across the board, but especially for kids from tough backgrounds, and that progress must start early in life, when the possibilities still stretch out ahead," Phillipson said.

"That's why the [prime minister's] plan for change also sets the milestone of a record number of children starting school ready to learn."

RISE teams were launched last month to broker support for struggling schools.

Phillipson also told the conference she was looking at options to provide support for schools regarding "overlapping" parental complaints to multiple agencies.

And she revealed there were no plans to scrap the Oak National Academy or LocatED, despite government plans to slash quangos.

4. Ofsted critics want 'low-accountability system'



Ofsted chief inspector Sir Martyn Oliver accused the "most vocal critics" of proposed inspection reforms of seeking a "low-accountability system", and insisted report cards "are not and never were going to bring about the end of grading".

In his keynote address at the conference, Oliver urged sector leaders to take part in Ofsted's ongoing consultation into proposed reforms.

He said they have been met with some "really encouraging" feedback, along with "a small number of rather surprising responses" which he claimed were "seemingly built on a misunderstanding of what report cards are".

"The most vocal critics of the proposed reforms seem to be under the misapprehension that a new low-accountability system is possible," Oliver said.

"It isn't. Ofsted will always put children and their parents first".

He added the report cards "are not and never were going to be about less accountability".

The chief inspector said the proposed framework would help "move from low quality information and high-stakes inspection to a much richer, more nuanced set of information and sensible, supportive and proportionate accountability".

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UK**Sharon Mullins****Chief executive,
Oxford Diocesan
Schools Trust****Start date:** September 2025**Current job:** CEO, Embrace Multi-Academy Trust**Interesting fact:** Sharon is originally from Derby and is a huge Derby County supporter – which shows she is an eternal optimist.

Movers & Shakers

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

**Freya Thomas Monk****Managing
director, Pearson
Qualifications****Start date:** March 2025**Previous job:** Managing director, vocational qualifications and training, Pearson**Interesting fact:** Freya cycles around London every day, come rain or shine.**Jane Wilson****Chief executive,
Northern Education
Trust****Start date:** April 2025**Current job:** Deputy CEO, Northern Education Trust**Interesting fact:** Before training to teach, Jane trained as a nurse and was also a special constable for Cleveland police.**Mark Taylor****Interim chair,
Independent Schools
Council****Start date:** March 2025**Previous role:** Chair, the Association of Governing Bodies of Independent Schools**Interesting fact:** Mark once received a grievance on behalf of a parrot (no further details were supplied).**David Stanley****Executive chef,
Hertfordshire
Catering Ltd****Start date:** February 2025**Previous role:** Executive chef at Perse School**Interesting fact:** David once played the bugle for the Queen at Windsor Castle. He still has the shorts and the garters to prove it.

New chair for EPI

FEATURED



Sir Chris Husbands

A prominent academic has been named as the new chair of the board of trustees at the Education Policy Institute (EPI). Sir Chris Husbands has taken on the role at the think-tank from

Charles Brand, who had been serving as interim chair.

Former schools minister David Laws also served briefly as chair last year after Paul Marshall, its original chair and co-founder, stepped down in late 2023.

Husbands is a former director of the UCL Institute of Education and was vice-chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University until 2023. He has served on other boards including exam boards Edexcel and AQA, Universities UK and Sheffield College.

He also chaired the Doncaster opportunity area board and led the Teaching Excellence Framework for the government.

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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Feature

JESSICA HILL | @JESSJANEHILL



A new hope for UTCs?

After being written off as a failure by Michael Gove, Baker Dearing CEO Kate Ambrosi believes University Technical Colleges are perfectly placed to meet Labour's skills goals – but schools bill issues need ironing out first

When University Technical Colleges launched in 2010, they were hailed as the solution needed to propel young people to high-paying technical jobs and tackle skills shortages. But the fanfare for UTCs quickly faded. Of the 58 launched over the years, 14 were forced to close amid stiff competition for learners from schools and colleges, and dwindling support from the local employers

meant to back them.

Even Michael Gove – the education secretary who introduced them – concluded in 2017 the UTC experiment was a failure.

But Kate Ambrosi, new chief executive of the Baker Dearing Educational Trust, the charity which represents UTCs, believes it's time for a different story to be told.

Ambrosi joins at a time of acute skills

shortages, which she believes UTCs can address by expanding their provision into mainstream schools.

She aims to achieve what her predecessor, Simon Connell, failed to do with the last government: persuade it to invest in their proposals for UTC 'sleeves' in schools.

Ambrosi is quietly confident the current crop of politicians are more supportive; Rachel Reeves,

Feature: Kate Ambrosi



Kate Ambrosi speaking to new principals

Bridget Phillipson and Jacqui Smith have all visited UTCs and appreciate their worth, she claims.

A turning tide

Since their inception, UTCs have had to battle the long-entrenched British inferiority complex that clouds technical education.

To combat this, Ambrosi says UTCs “make it clear” to parents they don’t restrict options, but offer “multiple routes” – including A-levels.

When an apprenticeship does not work out, the UTC “supports learners to find the route that does. So maybe there’s less risk than it felt previously”.

More than half of UTCs are over-subscribed and two more are set to open – one in Southampton this year and another in Doncaster in 2027.

In 2019, only half of UTCs were rated ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted (compared to three-quarters of secondary schools). Following pressure from Baker Dearing, Ofsted and the Department for Education recognised that Progress 8 and EBacc were not appropriate accountability measures for UTCs and their bespoke curriculums.

Now, UTCs are almost on a par with their mainstream counterparts with over 80 per cent getting at least ‘good’ Ofsted ratings, compared to 84 per cent of secondaries overall.

However, this does come after many of those deemed to be failing closed, or joined academy trusts.

But Ofsted accepted that destinations were a more suitable measure of UTCs’ success, and on that front they are faring well.

Of their 20,000 learners, only 5 per cent



Speaking at an education event

‘If UTCs aren’t exempt from curriculum reforms, they’d be forced to close’

become NEET (not in education, employment, or training) when they leave, compared to a 13 per cent national average, while 20 per cent start an apprenticeship, compared to a 5 per cent national average.

Changing times

The last 12 months have been a period of change for Baker Dearing. While Connell was replaced by Ambrosi (his former deputy), the charity’s grandee founding father, Lord Kenneth Baker, relinquished his chairmanship to Stephen Phipson, the CEO of Make UK.

Ambrosi and I meet in London for coffee just before one of her regular meetings with the “really hard-working” 90-year-old Lord Baker, who remains Baker Dearing’s honorary life president and is still “very much our voice” in the House of Lords.

Baker’s original concept of UTCs to serve 14-19 year olds has been adapted to meet local realities; six UTCs are now 11-18 schools.

But Ambrosi says extending their age groups

has been challenging, as “a UTC is not set up for 11-year-olds”.

“You have to refurbish and change things significantly to meet the needs [of younger learners]They tend to have less outdoor space.” Ambrosi does not expect any more UTC schools to be created.

This week she visited the WMG Academy for Young Engineers campus in Coventry. Like many UTCs, its name gives no clue to its UTC status. But WMG is “exactly the model” that UTCs were intended for, because the 14-19 college was set up by and as part of Warwick University to meet the needs of the region’s automotive industry.

Few UTCs have university sponsors these days; almost three-quarters are run by multi-academy trusts.

MATerial gains

Aston University Engineering Academy is the latest UTC to join a MAT, the Aston University STEM Education Academy Trust, along with a new mathematics school for 16-19-year-olds and

Feature: Kate Ambrosi

a jewellery skills training centre.

Ambrosi commends some MATs for being great UTC caretakers, allowing them to maintain their raison d'être and not "putting any pressure on them to be anything else". The model is particularly effective when the MAT has a range of schools and can channel its pupils into the provision most appropriate to them.

Ambrosi says the "biggest change" UTCs have undergone in recent years is bringing in learners at year nine rather than year 10, giving them an extra year to "build the skills needed for their speciality".

While FE colleges have opposed the establishment of UTCs in some areas, local schools have been reluctant to promote UTCs in case their brightest pupils enrol.

Lord Baker tackled the problem head-on by introducing the 'Baker Clause' as an amendment to the Technical and Further Education Act 2017 (enhanced by the 2022 Skills Act), requiring schools to allow other providers access to their pupils to discuss non-academic pathways.

Ambrosi points out that UTCs are intended to be "regional specialist" colleges, "drawing in from far afield just one or two from each school" rather than taking a lion's share of a school's learners. "Those local ecosystems get used to it and stop being difficult", she says.

UTCs' recent success in marketing themselves to school pupils means that instead of having dwindling numbers, many are over-subscribed.

Roll up your sleeves

Ambrosi believes the time is now ripe for UTC sleeves to make their mark.

The concept of launching 14-19 UTC sleeves in schools to provide vocational pathways developed with the help of employers was first put to ministers in 2021. Since then, local skills improvement plans have helped UTCs match their sleeve proposals to the needs of their local economies.

At least 12 schools have expressed interest in the model but so far only one has opened. Struggling Bristol Technology and Engineering Academy was taken over by next-door



Kate with skills minister Jacqui Smith

'We can work with this government, they can be proud of UTCs'

Abbeywood School 2022, but Baker Dearing is "still developing" the provision to get employers there "more engaged".

Another sleeve is being developed with a school in Barrow, Cumbria, funded by BAE Systems. But elsewhere funding is a sticking point, with the DfE so far reluctant to provide the capital investment needed to develop schools' design and technology facilities.

T-level capital funding has helped some schools and UTCs "enormously", says Ambrosi, but "if they've missed that particular train then they can't invest".

Curriculum concerns

The children's and wellbeing schools bill could also cause problems, with a clause requiring academies to follow the national curriculum.

Baker Dearing has warned the DfE that "almost all UTCs would become financially unviable and most would be forced to close" if they weren't exempt.

Ambrosi's team also spent a "large chunk" of



Robotic dogs gifted to education trust

their time last year impressing on the curriculum and assessment review the importance of continuing to allow them to pursue a vocational and technical curriculum from age 13-14 onwards.

She sees the fact that UTCs are now oversubscribed as proof that their model is "what this nation needs".

"I truly believe that we can work with this government for them to be really proud of their UTC programme and really engage with it," she adds.

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Clare Halliday



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Curriculum
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OATESChair, 2010 national
curriculum reviewThe Francis review can already
claim a major achievement

Taking the long view of curriculum reviews, this week's interim report is a perfectly positioned document, writes Tim Oates. But the hard work lies ahead

The interim report from the curriculum and assessment review is a genuinely landmark document. It differs from previous curriculum review documents of the past few decades in a series of very important ways.

Sir Ron Dearing's reviews of the 1990s were masterclasses in responding to teachers' concerns about content overload, assessment burden and the place of national qualifications.

Dearing was the 'Great Fixer'; everyone in government knew that he would calm nerves and gain consensus around practical changes. He proposed changes which would make the national curriculum more manageable and yet still deliver on the educational and moral commitments behind a 'curriculum for all'.

Interestingly, every person involved in the review work at that time talked of 'entitlement' of young people – entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum.

In the Dearing era, no meeting seemed to pass without 'entitlement'

being used repeatedly, even though the word itself does not feature prominently in key legislation on the national curriculum.

The review of 2010 resembled the Dearing reviews in that it tackled pent-up domestic problems: the deep problems of 'levels', the vexed questions of methods of early reading and primary maths.

Where it differed from Sir Ron's work was in its very strong international focus. The commitment to a 'knowledge-rich' model, to 'fewer things in greater depth' in primary, to careful sequencing in the programmes of study all drew on meticulous scrutiny of high-performing systems.

This was careful 'policy learning', not the crude 'policy borrowing' which occurs too frequently around the world.

Building on strong foundations

The current review fits with international practice in being a thorough review of the curriculum after 10 years of implementation. Doing this isn't enshrined in some kind of international law, but it is a common approach across many nations.

But the review also differs from Dearing's reviews, which prioritised fixing serious weaknesses, and the 2010 review, which laid down new



“ Ultimately, a national curriculum must become a school curriculum

principles and benchmarked the curriculum internationally.

This new interim report focuses clearly on building on the solid foundations set by its predecessors, and looks intently at the extent to which the system in its entirety – curriculum, assessment and performance measures – is delivering attainment and equity.

It shouts: 'Remember the aims, focus relentlessly on evidence, and introduce change only where it can improve attainment and equity'.

For a teaching professional whose nemesis is the pendulum swing in policy – invariably accompanied by escalations in workload – this

is surely very good news. And for anyone following or engaged in policy making, it looks like good statecraft.

What better way to bring everyone along? Recognise where prior policy has worked; engage in scientific accumulation rather than ideological tampering; fine-tune accountability measures; and cautiously adapt subject curricula and assessment requirements.

Driving improvement

England is not alone in reviewing its national curriculum and its assessment arrangements. New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Belgium,

Continued on next page

Curriculum
ConversationDO YOU HAVE A STORY?
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Poland and Sweden all are looking hard at their arrangements.

It's not that they have simply reached some kind of 10-year deadline. In key instances, nations have been more than alert to the fact that while their educational standards have stagnated or declined, England's changes from 2010 resulted in an improvement of its international ranking.

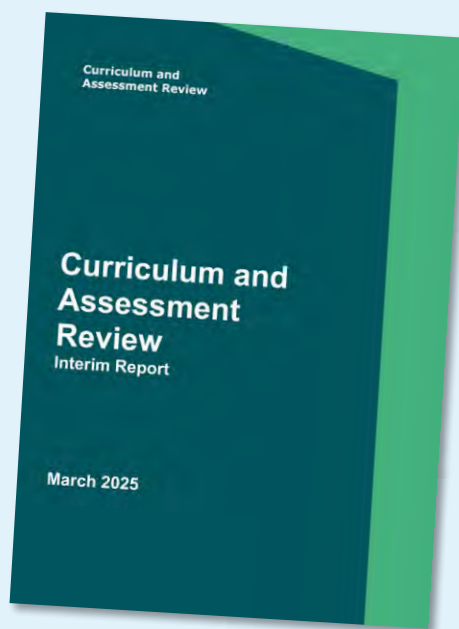
Our current review's interim report lists clearly the specific things in which they are interested: a knowledge-rich approach that provides the foundations for skills development; periodic assessment and 'checks' that support equity; national assessment that maintains standards and enjoys public confidence.

The report also rightly mentions 'unfinished business' from the 2014 review, such as under-specification of content in some areas, over-specification in others. It notes that content in some subjects is dated and needs refreshing.

But in this the interim report has avoided a pitfall which is all too prominent in curriculum review and reform around the world: the 'policy is practice' mistake.

Actually, it's really easy to make policy changes to a national curriculum and to qualifications. You just draft some new specifications. They are words on a page. What is genuinely difficult is ensuring that the policy's implementation is effective and leads to its intended results.

Ultimately, a national curriculum needs to be turned into a school curriculum. It has to be enacted in the classroom, minute by minute. To know if that's the case, we need dependable information on attainment at key points in primary and secondary education.



“ This will not be an easy message for ministers

If national assessments and accountability measures are designed well, they can inform national policy and provide valuable information for teachers, pupils and parents. And we know that if they are designed poorly, they can drive perverse incentives and become a barrier to improvement.

All eyes on England

In short, assessment and accountability drive systems, and consistently driving them in the right direction requires periodic fine-tuning. This is something Scotland, Northern Ireland and Sweden are looking at with intensity and urgency.

Elsewhere around the world, educators are looking with huge interest at England for the details of what has been achieved, step by step, since the 1990s.

But those engaged in international

comparisons know that it's vital to look at data on variation between schools and variation within schools. In particular, these variations highlight differences in quality of provision and differences in life chances which are linked to social inequalities.

Rather than assume sweeping changes to the national curriculum and a recasting of national qualifications will address these serious practical challenges, I welcome the meticulous approach of the review to date: analyse the data, understand the problem, recognise all of the factors in play, and judge carefully whether a change is required – in policy, in practice or in support.

This will not be an easy message for ministers; changing words on a page is far easier than committing to addressing entrenched inequalities and variability of provision. So it is

laudable that the report doesn't run from this difficult message.

Taking on trade-offs

I know full well that an interim report of this kind doesn't land with an unannounced thump on ministerial desks. Government machinery will have processed draft after draft; implications, possibilities and options will have been wrangled and examined.

And I recognise full well that this is an interim report. It signals the broad sweep of change and highlights the precise points for the next stages of detailed scrutiny and development.

But what we have so far is very well grounded in the reality of our education system and our society. And the aims which drive its recommendations on 'direction of travel' are consistent with what our national curriculum has always focused on: equity as well as achievement.

Critical readers will be rightly suspicious at this point. I have been singularly positive about the report, and we are visibly nearing the end of my article. There must surely be a 'but'.

There is, but my 'but' simply repeats the report itself: the hard graft of really effective policy is all for the next phase.

For now, the direction of the proposals is looking well-grounded in evidence, well-considered and focused on exactly the right issues.

But there are hard trade-offs between breadth and balance, between assessment and workload, between updating subject content and overloading the syllabus, and between broad policy aims and subject specificity.

The report represents significant progress in the review. Now the difficult work begins.

Opinion

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VICTORIA
HATTON

Senior associate,
Browne Jacobson

Should schools be able to remove pupils for parents' behaviour?

Victoria Hatton explores how schools might be armed with an effective deterrent against the rising menace of abusive parental behaviours

The relationship between schools and parents plays a pivotal role in shaping the learning environment and overall pupil wellbeing. When this relationship deteriorates beyond repair, it can take a real toll well beyond those directly concerned. But what to do about it?

The controversial idea I want to explore here is that schools should have the authority to remove a pupil from their roll when this happens.

Rising abuse against schools

Schools, trusts, trade unions, charities and professional bodies have repeatedly called for action to address the persistent issue of complex and vexatious parent complaints as well as unacceptable parental behaviour towards schools, staff and governors.

In our spring 2024 School Leaders Survey, 68 per cent cited personal attacks and aggressive behaviour towards staff as the most common type of vexatious complaint behaviour.

A more recent poll of 1,600 National Association of Headteachers members highlights a continuing and increasing strain in home-school relationships. Here, a staggering 80

per cent of school leaders reported instances of abuse from parents, ranging from verbal to physical assaults as well as trolling on social media.

This is causing real distress for school leaders and their staff, and is a clear contributing factor to the sector's recruitment and retention crisis.

The case for legal action

Steps can be taken to minimise the impact of unacceptable parental behaviour under the current legislative framework. These include limiting parental access to the school site and putting in place a communication plan.

However, it is unlawful to remove a pupil from the school roll because of parental behaviour, even when the relationship between home and school has irretrievably broken down. Managed moves are an option, but require parental consent.

Given the pervasive nature of these challenges and their disproportionate toll on whole schools' ability to function effectively, it is right that we should consider reviewing the law in this area.

Removing a pupil because the home-school relationship is irretrievably broken is already within the powers of some independent schools. These often have a termination clause in their contract, triggered – as a last resort and after fair warning – by unacceptable



“ Doing this would require robust safeguards

parent behaviour.

To implement a similar approach in the publicly funded sector would require legislative change, not least to Regulation 9 of the School Attendance (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2024, which sets out the circumstances where a school must remove a pupil from the school roll.

Balancing the scales

Such a measure would require robust safeguards to ensure fairness and justice.

Statutory guidance would be essential to clearly define what constitutes an "irretrievable breakdown in relationship" and to outline the steps schools must take before arriving at the decision to remove a pupil.

This guidance could include mandatory mediation attempts, with a requirement for at least one to be facilitated by an independent, third-party mediator.

Guidance could also dictate a requirement for documented warnings, and a thorough review of the impact on the pupil's education and welfare. Consideration would also need to be given to the process of identifying a new school placement as quickly as possible,

whether under a revised Fair Access Protocol procedure or otherwise.

An appeal mechanism would also be crucial to protect the interests of the affected pupil and their family. This could be structured similarly to the existing process for exclusions, where governors and an independent panel review the decision and consider evidence from both sides.

Such a process would help to ensure the decision to remove a pupil is made transparently and subject to scrutiny, thereby upholding the principles of fairness and accountability.

A new, clear deterrent

The system evidently needs to change, as much to stem rising complaints and alleviate the burden on schools as to remove duplication and revise the regulatory framework.

This proposal is a complex and potentially contentious one, but with the right safeguards and a clear and fair process it could serve as a last-resort mechanism, when all other reconciliation efforts have failed.

Importantly, it could be an effective deterrent to the minority of parents engaging in unacceptable behaviours that affect the whole school community.

Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@SCHOOLSWEEK.CO.UKDR TONY
BRESLINSchool improvement and
governance development
consultant'Evolution' may not be quick
enough to meet our challenges

A new development-focused language of school improvement is slowly emerging, writes Tony Breslin, but are system leaders ready to ditch a deficit-driven paradigm?

Last week, in language reminiscent of David Cameron a decade and a half ago, Keir Starmer expressed his disdain for a "watchdog state, completely out of whack with the priorities of the British people". Their words may differ, but the language hasn't changed.

In 2010, the "bonfire of the quangos" torched several agencies committed to support and development (including the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, the National College for Teaching and Leadership and the General Teaching Council) while empowering those concerned with compliance and regulation, notably Ofsted and Ofqual.

Our system's low-trust focus on regulation is accentuated by a language of school improvement that has long been rooted in deficit-thinking. It is articulated in a discourse of control, compliance, monitoring and inspection, rather than of creativity, innovation, development and quality assurance.

There was some justification for this when the school improvement movement emerged in the 1980s. It is beyond question that performance

metrics, inspection and appraisals drove up outcomes for many young people.

But 40 years on, our education system is in a wholly different and better place. Rapid improvement (most evident under New Labour when need was matched by investment) has long since plateaued.

Indeed, the strategies that once drove up standards are now driving out teachers and leaders, negatively affecting the wellbeing of children and staff – sometimes with tragic consequences – and creating, in Ofsted's own phrasing, a cadre of "stuck schools".

It's only the experience of the pandemic that has caused policymakers to begin to acknowledge, almost begrudgingly, that school improvement is harder in some settings than others and that socio-economic background and local context have a profound impact on outcomes. This is a reality that the success of a smattering of media-savvy 'super heads' cannot fix.

Lockdown didn't create the multiple layers of educational disadvantage it exposed, but it undoubtedly accentuated them. It also crystalised the question of whether conventional schooling can meet the needs of all young people; if not, what can?

The existing language of school improvement frames current levels of pupil absenteeism as a crisis of school attendance; a new language



David Cameron on a school visit

“ Different frames engender
different responses

would frame it as an issue of educational engagement. Different frames engender different responses.

It also measures success against criteria built for a stable world that has long disappeared in the rearview mirror. Thus, Martyn Oliver's Ofsted consultation asks how we should inspect, not whether this is the best or sole means of quality assurance, which is surely the objective.

The same goes for league tables and performance management systems: quality assurance methods have become unchallengeable ends in themselves.

Sadly, this week's interim report from the curriculum and assessment review reveals the same thinking: our current approach, it argues, only needs tweaking.

A common refrain across these reforms – in education and across government – is a commitment to 'evolution, not revolution'. No doubt intended to reassure, this risks ignoring the scale of the challenges and opportunities ahead: AI, assessment, online learning and SEND.

No one would argue for a political pendulum swing, but framing reform in this way is itself part of this language of low trust and deficit.

The sector is crying out for a longer-term vision underpinned by a new language for school improvement, one defined by 21st-century purpose, not 20th-century metrics.

We need to reward schools for ingenuity, innovation and creativity, not the ability to remain 'faithful' to a particular reading scheme or the implementation of politically fashionable policies and practices.

In this context, the test of Bridget Phillipson's new RISE teams will be whether they can dispense with the language of 'monitoring' and adopt an approach that is about collaboration.

Encouragingly, this appears to be the policy's intention. Time will tell whether the pressures of political accountability once again trump the need for smarter school support. But at least the language from the DfE is right.

Sir Keir's is too; we do need to roll back the watchdog state. Phillipson, Francis and Oliver have been given the opportunity to lead the way. Some will find it easier to embrace a new language of improvement than others, but all will have to – or we will find evolution is quickly outpaced by events.

Opinion

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SEAMUS
MURPHY

CEO, Turner Schools

Centralisation is not the answer to variable SEND practice

Calls for a national centre for evidence in SEND misunderstand the nature of educational research and what really drives school improvement, says Seamus Murphy

At first glance, the recent call in these pages for a version of National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) for the special educational needs sector makes perfect sense. But on reflection there are a number of challenges.

First, there is widespread misunderstanding about the nature of educational research. In spite of the hopes of many in the sector, the tools of medical research such as randomly-controlled trials, case cohort studies and clinical trials, when applied to our sector, are too often uninformative at best.

What's more, in education we are now in uncharted waters when it comes to the prevalence of children with complex additional needs, in the most part due to the increased efficacy of medical practitioners.

And lastly, we operate now in a context where there is a much greater awareness of perceived need, which has led to a quadrupling of demand at every level in the sector.

The siren call of centralisation is strong for governments of all shades. However, there is a

compelling case to be made that this drive to provide central expertise undermines the professionalism (and even self-confidence) of our workforce.

As a sector, we have seen the rise of the National Institute of Teaching, the demise of the National College for School Leadership and the disappearance of the General Teaching Council.

The last thing the sector needs right now is an ideologically-driven centre for SEND that dispenses the next big thing in SEND to schools and colleges up and down the country.

There is, however, a space for more informed educational research beyond the Education Endowment Fund. Funding could support smaller and more flexible research projects that are school or locality-based. This could provide a more compelling, context-driven and diverse evidence base for practitioners.

It is also worth examining what other countries are doing to manage the increase in the number of children with learning gaps and barriers.

However, in the absence of helpful guidance, what can system leaders and policymakers do now?

In the first instance, acknowledge that effective teaching meets the needs of the vast majority of pupils with barriers in mainstream settings.



“ This is the last thing the sector needs right now

Second, ensure that every school is fully inclusive in how it supports pupils whose behaviours, characteristics and challenges are not the norm.

Third, promote to the majority of parents that special arrangements for their children are not necessary; their needs will be well met in a well-run and inclusive setting.

For those parents and advocacy groups who loudly demand special treatment for their children, manage their expectations. The system cannot cater for every individual special educational need.

Crucially, given the significant link between poverty, a child's family history and the likelihood of having additional barriers or learning gaps, funding should go to those with the greatest need.

And finally, measure success at 21 or 25, where young people can demonstrate they have agency and independence to lead meaningful lives rather than become statistics in the ever-increasing welfare crisis. Schools are not the only point of accountability for their success.

In the meantime, we school leaders must commit to developing

our workforce to be even-more-expert teachers. This will allow us to meet the needs of the pupils in our contexts, to share professional development across our sector and to build capacity in every classroom, rather than devolving responsibility to those individuals with SEND in their title.

We also need to examine our own institutions to test whether they are suitably ambitious for all the pupils we serve.

And we must prioritise need over demand for the shrinking additional resources and capacity outside of mainstream settings in our local areas.

Currently, nearly twice as many pupils in the independent sector receive extra time in their formal exams as do in state schools.

We cannot continue as we are with a system hurtling towards bankruptcy, where SEND support is being most rationed in areas of highest deprivation, and where support is increasingly only available for the families who can afford it.

The way out of this doom loop is not centralisation. It is partnership and local innovation.

Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
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Five years on: Legacies of lockdown



**DEBRA
RUTLEY**

CEO, Aspire Schools

Whatever happened to our spirit of collaboration?

Revisiting her *Schools Week* 'lockdown diary' from 2020, Debra Rutley finds few of the relationships forged in that fire have survived

Re-reading my 'lockdown diary' from five years ago brought a range of emotions. My dominant thought, however, was that while the world has moved on, we in AP are still seeing the impact that first lockdown had on our most vulnerable children.

Revisiting the personal aspects of my reflections back then did make me smile at all the positive things that haven't changed.

I still get up early and work too much. Our APSEND network is still going strong with many more members who benefit from collegiate work and support. And I'm still working with headteacher colleagues who took advantage of wellbeing coaching during lockdown.

The vulnerability we shared in those challenging times has cemented relationships and reminds me of the famous Teddy Roosevelt quote: "It is not the critic who counts. [...] The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, [...] who strives valiantly, who errs, who comes up short again and again."

For school leaders in AP, men and women, the arena was tough in 2020. It is still tough today. And

that's because it is toughest of all for our students.

Sadly, our relationship with the local authority did not stand the test of time. As the political urgency to meet need waned, so did the impetus to collaborate. People moved on and priorities changed. But I'm still here, and perhaps the new government's focus on collaboration will help us recapture some of that.

Because all that's really changed is the sense of urgency. I've been leading in AP for 24 years, and I'm still repeating my mantra: during times of challenge, it is our children who suffer the most and the consequences persist for years, perhaps lifetimes.

During Covid, this fell on listening ears, but AP today is full to the brim with children who missed out significantly during that period – and there have been other crises since.

We see it in behavioural issues, poor mental health, social issues and a lack of motivation. Year 7 students struggle with transition to secondary school. They arrive in AP with significant gaps in learning and a real reluctance to attend school.

Vulnerabilities were brought to light during the lockdowns, but they haven't gone away and many young people haven't quite recovered.

On a more positive note, Aspire's relationship with the Rothschild



“ All that's really changed is our sense of urgency

Foundation bonded during lockdown and has only strengthened over time.

We shared a common purpose of enhancing the lives of children by providing for vulnerable families in any way we could. Today, they continue to support us to enrich the lives of our young people, providing funding for opportunities others take for granted.

We are incredibly fortunate that our values align and both organisations are committed to ensuring our young people have opportunities to flourish and thrive, not just survive. This relationship has moved from the transactional to the relational; they are in the arena with us, supporting us to support children.

I still remind myself, as I did in lockdown, of the love we see daily in the small things. It can be hard to love in AP, with turbulence and outward signs of trauma, but staff remind themselves that we change lives with and through love.

During lockdown, we all prioritised what it is to be human and built many high-quality, meaningful relationships that protected so many

children, families and communities. The collective spirit that arose from that crisis gave us the courage to hope.

But hope requires action. Five years ago, we all did everything we could. In the face of today's challenges – some old and some new, some still linked to Covid and many that seem perpetual – we should remember that to be human is messy and vulnerable, and we should make the deliberate choice to love more.

The love language of that time was "we'll figure this out together". We need more of that now.

Roosevelt's quote continues: "If he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat".

This woman dares. Will Bridget Phillipson?

In 2020, Schools Week chronicled school closures through a series of 'lockdown diaries'. Over the coming weeks, our diarists will be reflecting on their entries and the pandemic's ongoing impact.

Solutions

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JESSICA SHEPHERD

Founder and director,
Sparrowhawk Communications

Six tips to communicate a negative inspection report

Making good use of the post-inspection window can make all the difference to the next part of your improvement journey, explains Jessica Shepherd

Recent and ongoing Ofsted reforms aim to ease the stress of inspections. This is much-needed and especially reassuring to those who face unfavourable outcomes. But there is another way to reduce the stress of an Ofsted report, and that is to take proactive action about how to communicate it.

The report may say things about your school that you don't relish sharing with your community, but the worst thing you can do is to bury your head in the sand.

Yes, you'd rather be ordering a banner. Yes, you'd rather be tipping off the local media. But instead of dreading their call, it's best to act quickly and take control of the situation.

Currently, headteachers and school trusts typically receive a draft Ofsted report about 10 days after an inspection. The final report is normally published on Ofsted's website about 30 days after the inspection.

During this time, a school can request changes if necessary. Whether or not you are doing that, this time before Ofsted publishes its

report is crucial for preparing your communications strategy.

Here are my six tips for making that strategy as effective as possible.

A united front

Your staff will already know the outcome, and they will be sworn to the same secrecy as you. What mustn't stay secret, however, is how they feel about it.

That is the way to even bigger problems, so create opportunities for them to share openly, acknowledge those feelings, and make them part of the mission to put this report in the past.

Before report publication time, brief them. Provide them with the press release and the school's self-evaluation form (SEF). Then, equip them with a concise Q&A to address potentially tricky questions. This will mean the school presents a united front to help the community process the outcome.

Mini action plans

Be transparent about any negative findings and clearly communicate your improvement plans. Extract key points from your SEF to create an accessible mini-action plan, and tailor this for your different audiences, such as parents and carers and external partners.

Allow parents and carers and your staff a voice when it comes



“ It's not a good look to blame Ofsted

to shaping improvements through focus groups or questionnaires.

Be precise and concise

Many parents and carers will not read the full report and will rely on the school's communications to find out about it. Keep your communications short and focused, even when there's a lot to say. Try to limit yourself to seven or eight paragraphs summarising the report and your next steps.

Highlight your key messages early, focusing on the most important findings and your next steps in the opening paragraphs so that parents and carers who don't read it all will quickly grasp the main messages.

Maximise communication channels

Communicate your improvement strategies through multiple channels, including newsletters, emails, social media and in-person meetings. Include a governor in parent/carer meetings to support with responses to tough questions.

This collaborative approach strengthens relationships and shows a commitment to progress.

Highlight positives

There are usually constructive

quotes that you can pull from the report to include in your communications. Celebrate what you are doing well and any progress you are making towards your mission and end goals, even if they seem far away.

Parents, carers and other key partners don't mind waiting for information as long as they are kept up-to-date, so regularly report back on progress towards goals as this shows you have a strong improvement plan in place.

Manage emotions

It's crucial to avoid defensive responses. It's not a good look to blame Ofsted or to criticise previous leaders. It's much more effective to acknowledge the report as a snapshot in time and focus on constructive next steps. Audiences appreciate a clear commitment to improvement.

Finally, and crucially, don't neglect your own emotions. Seek support if you need it and accept it if it's offered.

This is among the most challenging events in a school leader's career, but as many colleagues can attest, effective communications can turn a challenging Ofsted report into an opportunity to grow and build loyalty.

THE REVIEW

REINVENTING EDUCATION: BEYOND THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

Authors: Alan Watkins and Matt Silver

Publisher: Routledge

Publication date: February 2025

ISBN: 103287080X

Reviewer: Sam Parrett CBE, CEO, London South East Academies Trust

As CEO of both a MAT and a further education college, I found this book a thought-provoking and useful read. It doesn't just diagnose the challenges we all face but provides a blueprint for real change.

Burnout, disillusionment, stress, low productivity. These aren't abstract concepts; they are everyday realities we see in our schools and colleges.

What our sector doesn't need is more critique. There's already plenty of that. What we need is a way forward – a map to connect what we already understand about the problems with the solutions we know can work.

This book delivers that, offering a fresh perspective on how education must evolve if we are to develop young people who can truly thrive in the modern world.

Watkins and Silver argue that the traditional education model – one built on standardised assessments, rigid knowledge transfer and arguably outdated curricula – is failing our young people. As someone who leads schools and colleges across different communities, my team and I see this every day.

Our learners are growing up in a rapidly-changing world, one that demands adaptability, emotional resilience and problem-solving skills. Yet we continue to assess their success through narrow academic measures that do little to prepare them for life beyond the classroom.

Like many before it, this book identifies these shortcomings in our current system. More uniquely, it manages to offer hope through a 'deliberately developmental' approach.

The authors make a compelling case for education that prioritises social development alongside academic learning, equipping young people with the skills and mindsets they need to develop and progress successfully.

For me, one of the most striking aspects of this book is its focus on what we are *not* teaching. In a post-Covid world where anxiety and mental health issues among young people are at all-time highs, the need to develop emotional intelligence and resilience is essential.

Meanwhile, our schools and colleges work closely with employers who tell us they are crying out for young people who can think creatively and manage stress in high-pressure environments.

These aren't just 'soft skills', they are the foundation upon which knowledge and technical ability are built. Watkins and Silver rightly highlight that if we want young people to be successful, we must rethink what and how we teach.

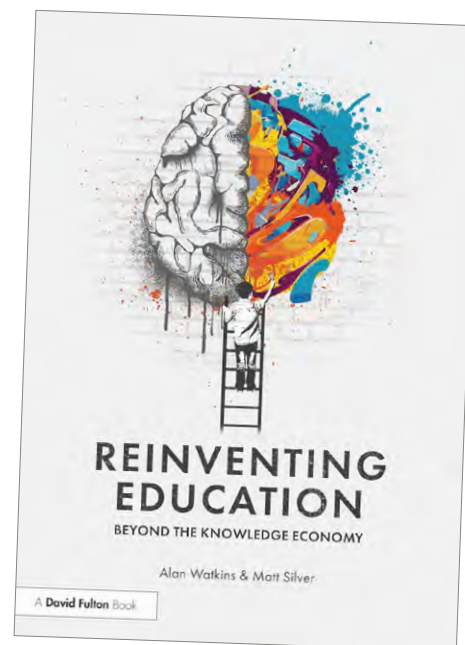
What sets *Reinventing Education* apart is its practicality. Unlike many books that diagnose problems without offering solutions, this book provides clear frameworks and real-world case studies that demonstrate how change can happen.

One excellent example is the Kemnal Academies Trust (TKAT), which implemented a developmental approach with tangible success. They improved reading scores and phonics test results through a focus on personal growth as well as academic progress.

This is exactly the shift we need. We often talk about system reform, but before we can change the wider landscape we must first examine our own internal systems – our mindsets, priorities and willingness to embrace different ideas and practices.

And this is what *Reinventing Education* challenges us to do. For all its (justified) critique of the current system, it ultimately leaves us with hope, yes, but also some tangible ways to

BOOK
TV
FILM
RADIO
EVENT
RESOURCE



start making that hope a reality.

The authors refer to 'glimmers of change'. As someone who works every day to improve outcomes for young people, I hold onto that optimism. Change is possible, but it requires bold thinking, compassionate leadership and a desire to put human development at the heart of education reform.

I hope policymakers and reformers take note. As we rethink curriculum, assessment and inclusion across the system, we must move beyond knowledge transfer and embed emotional literacy, creativity and wellbeing into our practices as standard, not as add-ons.

It's the right thing to do, and it's what the future workforce demands. As John Dewey wisely said, "If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow."

Reinventing Education is a must-read for anyone committed to building an education system that works for all – one that goes far beyond preparing students for exams to equip them more fully for the challenges of life and work.

THE CONVERSATION

LISTENING IN ON THE DIGITAL STAFFROOM

Sarah Baker

CEO, TEAM Education Trust

MANAGING MICRO-TRANSITIONS

As we plan for the next academic year, it's important to remember that transitions large and small play a pivotal role in children's progress. This recent blog by Whole School SEND on the importance of transition in primary settings serves as an excellent reminder of this.

The piece emphasises that while we often focus on the major transitions, such as moving from one year group to another or from primary to secondary school, the smaller 'micro-transitions' are just as critical. These can include changes in routine, new staff members or shifts in classroom environments.

This can be dysregulating for children, so as teachers and leaders, it's on us to think ahead, involve the children in the process and collaborate with their families and other stakeholders.

Planning for transitions proactively ensures we can identify and address potential challenges early, creating smoother experiences for everyone involved. This is especially crucial for our SEND students and other vulnerable children, who may face additional hurdles during transitions.

The Whole School SEND blog provides simple, practical steps to facilitate

meaningful conversations with children, their families and broader school communities. These insights are invaluable, particularly for new staff members working with diverse learners.

It's often the small things – the attention to detail and early communication – that help reduce stress and prevent difficulties in the bigger transitions. Sweating the small stuff can, in fact, make all the difference in achieving successful outcomes.

MAKING A MEAL OF IT

One micro-transition that happens daily is the start of the

school day. Getting this right can make the difference between attendance and non-attendance and ensure all who come through the school gate are ready for the day.

Trust CEO Annette Montague's blog for ASCL discussing the benefits and challenges of breakfast clubs in primary schools underscores how crucial these early moments are.

A well-supported start, such as through a breakfast club, can ease this transition and foster a sense of community. And as we know, creating environments where young learners feel prepared and included is one of those policies that is 'good for all and vital for some'.

So as the government's policy of breakfast clubs in all primary schools is slowly rolled out, it's important to remember that they provide children and their parents with much more than just a meal and childcare.

The consistent routine of a club means students feel a sense of belonging and stability, which is crucial for their overall wellbeing and engagement in learning and, in turn, gives parents the gift of smoother mornings, which can only help home-school relationships.

Montague's blog is mostly concerned with the logistical challenges at the heart of



criticisms levelled at the policy, not least the strain on school resources and staffing.

But she does point out that breakfast clubs can be especially beneficial for families facing financial hardship, and notes that some schools are using their pupil premium grant to cover costs for certain children.

It's clear the policy still has problems that need ironing out – but ethically at least it's a no-brainer.

SPEAKING SENSE

Lastly this week, echoing comments by Speech and Language UK CEO Jane Harris in these pages last week, the latest episode of the GL Assessment podcast delves into the growing issue of speech and language difficulties among children in our schools.

The discussion, featuring experts like Rachael Symons and Susanne Humpage, explores the significant challenges children face when they cannot articulate their thoughts, emphasising how essential communication is for feeling safe, included and able to thrive.

The conversation underscores that without effective means of communication, children struggle not only academically but also socially, as they find it difficult to participate and form connections with peers.

The importance of speech and language development for a child's sense of belonging and overall wellbeing is emphasised, stressing that overcoming these challenges is crucial for children's growth and success in school and beyond.

This episode reinforces the need for better support systems and resources to address speech and language difficulties for all children, and the earlier the better.

Starting school, after all, is the biggest educational transition of all.



Click the links to access the blogs and podcasts



The Knowledge

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



Is coaching the ideal form of professional development?

C.J. Rauch, Head of teaching and learning, Evidence Based Education
Ourania Maria Ventista, Research statistician, Evidence Based Education

School leaders and teachers have been increasingly turning to coaching for professional development. But is it right for everyone? Should every school pivot to a coaching model? And is it really a best bet for teachers' professional development?

In theory, coaching encourages teachers to improve their practice, much in the way that a teacher would hope pupils improve their learning. At the same time, it is a model built on a sense of agency for the teacher, which we know is conducive to engagement.

The important question is whether the research evidence bears out these benefits.

As educationalists with a research background, our first instinct is to define the terms of our inquiry, and here is where we find the first stumbling block.

There is in fact surprisingly little consensus on what coaching actually is. This is even more true when employing the phrase 'instructional coaching' made popular by the author Dr Jim Knight. (Had he spoken British rather than North American English, he might have chosen slightly less murky terminology, like teacher mentoring.)

What we're left with is a range of different models that all purport to offer 'coaching' – a classic case of educational jingle-jangle, a term used to describe situations where either the same name means different things, or the same construct has different names.

However, the existing research does offer some good news. One meta-analysis looked at professional development programmes where coaches observed teachers and provided feedback (a rather broad definition). These researchers found that coaching programmes had an overall positive effect on pupil achievement.

Of course, as with any good research, the study's conclusions came with caveats.

Eagerness of teachers

When a school implements coaching on a wider scale, expanding beyond a voluntary programme, the positive effects diminish. While



the enthusiasm and expertise of coaches is important, the willingness of teachers to engage with the programme is even more essential.

Scaling expertise

To remain an effective intervention for professional development at a large scale, coaching models need an increasing number of expert coaches.

A large school, college or multi-academy trust will need a significant 'coaching corps' to provide each teacher sufficient time for observations and feedback, without which effectiveness dwindles.

Resource intensiveness

Schools that implement a coaching model generally tend to assign a teacher or senior leader as a coach.

In a small primary school, this senior leader coach will be dedicating about a day per week to coaching duties – a significant resource cost, especially considering the time could be spent teaching. Increase the size of the school and suddenly coaching is a full-time role, or even bigger.

All of which leads us to a big question implicit in our earlier queries about coaching: If we turn the best teachers into coaches, will their impact on the effectiveness of their colleagues

outweigh the loss of the coaches' own classroom expertise? In other words, might it be better if the coaches were instead dedicating all their time to their own teaching?

The research suggests this is a matter of careful implementation. Coaching can be an effective model, but probably not for every school. Coaching is a demonstrably effective targeted intervention with enthusiastic teachers, but this does not make for a one-size-fits-all approach.

If the challenge lies with increasing the scale, we suggest picking elements of coaching models that are more easily scalable.

For example, we've written previously about the potential of teacher collaboration. Shifting from one-to-one to a collaborative model can still offer the challenge and feedback of coaching in a less resource-intensive way.

Teachers and school leaders are right to be wary of 'one-and-done' professional development sessions. We call this the 'inspire and forget' approach, and any CPD (like coaching) that encourages sustained trialling, testing and developing of context-specific teaching is a much better bet.

However, the practical realities of schools mean it is hardly the one and only (or even ideal) approach to improving teacher effectiveness.

As with so much else in education, it's a question of resource and context.

Week in

Westminster

The week that was in the corridors of power

FRIDAY

The ASCL conference auditorium erupted in widespread laughter today as Sir Martyn Oliver, with no hint of irony, told hundreds of gathered school leaders: "I don't want you to be doing anything 'for Ofsted'."

The chief inspector stood silent and unsmiling as the laughter continued for several moments, doing his best 'headteacher stare', before it finally petered out.

(Despite what Oliver told journalists in a briefing straight after, this was definitely more than just a "very small number" of leaders laughing).

He had been telling the audience that nothing in the reforms proposed by Ofsted "should be a surprise or require extra work" from school leaders. "I hope there's nothing in there that you would just stop doing if we didn't exist," he added.

It was to be the only moment of laughter in an otherwise feisty keynote address, in which Oliver pitched Ofsted as putting "children and their parents first" while accusing its "most vocal critics" of wanting a "low-accountability" inspection system.

He said Ofsted's reform consultation has had some "really encouraging" feedback, but "a small number of rather surprising responses" were "seemingly built on a misunderstanding of what report cards are".

So, it looks like we're back with Ofsted blaming everyone else again. That didn't take long!

PS Another factor causing laughter among attendees was the unfortunate signage behind both Oliver and Bridget Phillipson at the conference.

It was remarked upon to *Schools Week's* reporters by a handful of readers. We'll leave

the picture here and let you draw your own conclusions ...



MONDAY

Labour's press operation has been getting a bit of a kicking over a few questionable decisions since they got into government (such as letting Phillipson into the same room as Katharine Birbalsingh and the ensuing fracas).

Another lowlight today came when shadow education secretary Laura Trott made an official complaint over "smearing" public servants.

The row followed a "government source" telling the Daily Telegraph that former Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman "should spend less time criticising" reforms and "more time reflecting on her failure at Ofsted and on a teaching profession that entirely lost confidence in her as chief inspector".

Spielman had written a critical piece herself slamming Labour for being in the pocket of unions.

But, in a response, the Department for Education's permanent secretary Susan Acland-Hood said she had discussed the comments with Phillipson and they both agreed the quote "came uncomfortably close to a personal attack".

"I have therefore made it clear to those responsible for issuing government quotes of this kind that greater care must

be taken in future to work not just to, but comfortably beyond, the standards delivered," she said.

Ouch.

PS We're sure many of you who've been around in education long enough will see the irony of the Tories complaining about nasty government operators.

Michael Gove's special adviser – one Dominic Cummings – springs to mind. The Observer newspaper reported in 2013 that Cummings was linked with the Tory education Twitter account, which attacked (in a highly personal manner) critics of Gove's reforms.

TUESDAY

Phillipson's relationship with trusts has been a bit of a rocky one after some of her rhetoric about academies since taking office (although she was warmed since, and now regularly praises trusts).

But she didn't help matters again this week when she wrote in the Telegraph: "Opposition shadow ministers and their friends in the commentariat should try leaving London for a change: they'll find plenty of underperforming academies which need new answers to drive up standards in their classrooms."

That gave more ammo for Labour's critics to accuse Phillipson of talking down trusts outside of London doing a good job.

However, quite a helpful reminder to those academy critics – things could be a lot worse, with some of the party's MPs much more hostile.

Take Welsh MP Steve Witherden for example. During today's schools bill, he said "for too long, school children have borne the brunt of academisation". Pay freedoms had "led to the exploitation of teachers".

Be careful what you wish for!



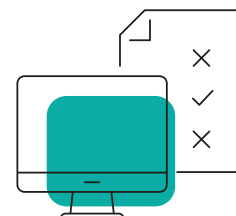


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SHEREDES PRIMARY SCHOOL

HEADTEACHER

Pay range: L16 – L24 (£73,539 - £88,150) Fringe
Location: Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire
Start date: September 2025
Closing date: 14th April 2025

Sheredes Primary School is seeking an inspiring and passionate Headteacher to join our thriving community.

At Sheredes, children are encouraged to explore, learn, and grow in a supportive environment, surrounded by expansive grounds and superb facilities.

As Headteacher, you will lead a dedicated team, fostering high expectations, inclusion, and innovation, while ensuring a balanced and well-being focused school culture. You will drive school improvement, support staff and students, and build strong relationships with parents and the community.

If you are ready to lead a school that values excellence and personal development, we want to hear from you!

To discuss the role, please contact Natalie Knight-Wickens, Chair of Governors, at admin@sheredesprimary.herts.sch.uk.

Apply via the Teach in Herts website.
 CVs will not be considered.



[Click to apply](#)



The Greenfield and Hurst Drive Federation



Job title: Executive Headteacher
Location: Waltham Cross
Start date: September 2025
Salary: L18 – L27 Fringe (£77,051 - £94,758)
Closing date: Tuesday 15th April 2025

Join us at the Greenfield and Hurst Drive Federation, where leadership meets purpose. We seek an Executive Headteacher ready to elevate their career in a role that combines innovation, inspiration, and community focus.

Our federation, founded on collaboration and inclusivity, invites you to lead two esteemed schools deeply embedded in their local community. Championing excellence in education, you'll build on our strong foundations, fostering a culture of high aspirations and wellbeing.

Why choose us?

Benefit from a stable, dedicated team, a culture of innovation, and strategic governance. Join a growing community offering fresh opportunities in an evolving local area.

Who are we looking for?

An experienced Headteacher or Executive Headteacher passionate about early years and primary education, with the vision to inspire, lead confidently, and drive excellence.

For more information and to apply, visit www.teachinherts.com





CEO Vacancy

Archway Learning Trust are looking for our next dynamic, inspirational and committed Chief Executive Officer, as our current exceptional and founding CEO looks to pass the baton on and enjoy their well-earned retirement.

We are looking for someone with the passion, energy, drive and focus to lead the next part of Archway's journey. Someone who is motivated by further enhancing the life chances of the children and communities we serve; and harnessing the considerable energy, enthusiasm and commitment of the many wonderful, committed professionals who collaborate to make Archway a truly unique, engaging and amazing place to work.

Archway Learning Trust (ALT) is a multi-million-pound business with an annual turnover of £72m and an estates portfolio valued at £186m that comprises of a mixture of PFI, leased and owned properties. This is a fabulous role with so many opportunities to make a real difference.

As the Archway CEO you will be an exemplar role model of the

Trust's vision, mission and values.

You will ensure that the outcomes, attainments and development of the character of the children that we serve stay central to all decision making. You will demonstrate consistently high standards of principled and professional conduct, always upholding and demonstrating The Principles of Public Life (Nolan Principles).

A passionate, engaging and respected leader, you will have an excellent understanding of the current educational landscape with a deep knowledge of Ofsted, DfE, and academy legislation. Working in the 'business of education' you will have a sound commercial acumen with the skills to oversee executive leaders in education, finance, operations, HR, and data.

Please visit CEO Vacancy - Archway Learning Trust for further information, our CEO brochure, Job description and People specification and to apply.

Applications for this role close at
Midnight 6th April 2025

JOIN US →

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